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KURT HERBERT ADLER AND THE SAN FRANCISCO OPERA

Volume I

THE LIFE AND CAREER OF KURT HERBERT ADLER

Interviews with Kurt Herbert Adler

With Introductions by
Beverly Sills,
Roger L. Stevens,
and Lotfi Mansouri

Interviews Conducted by
Timothy Pfaff
in 1985

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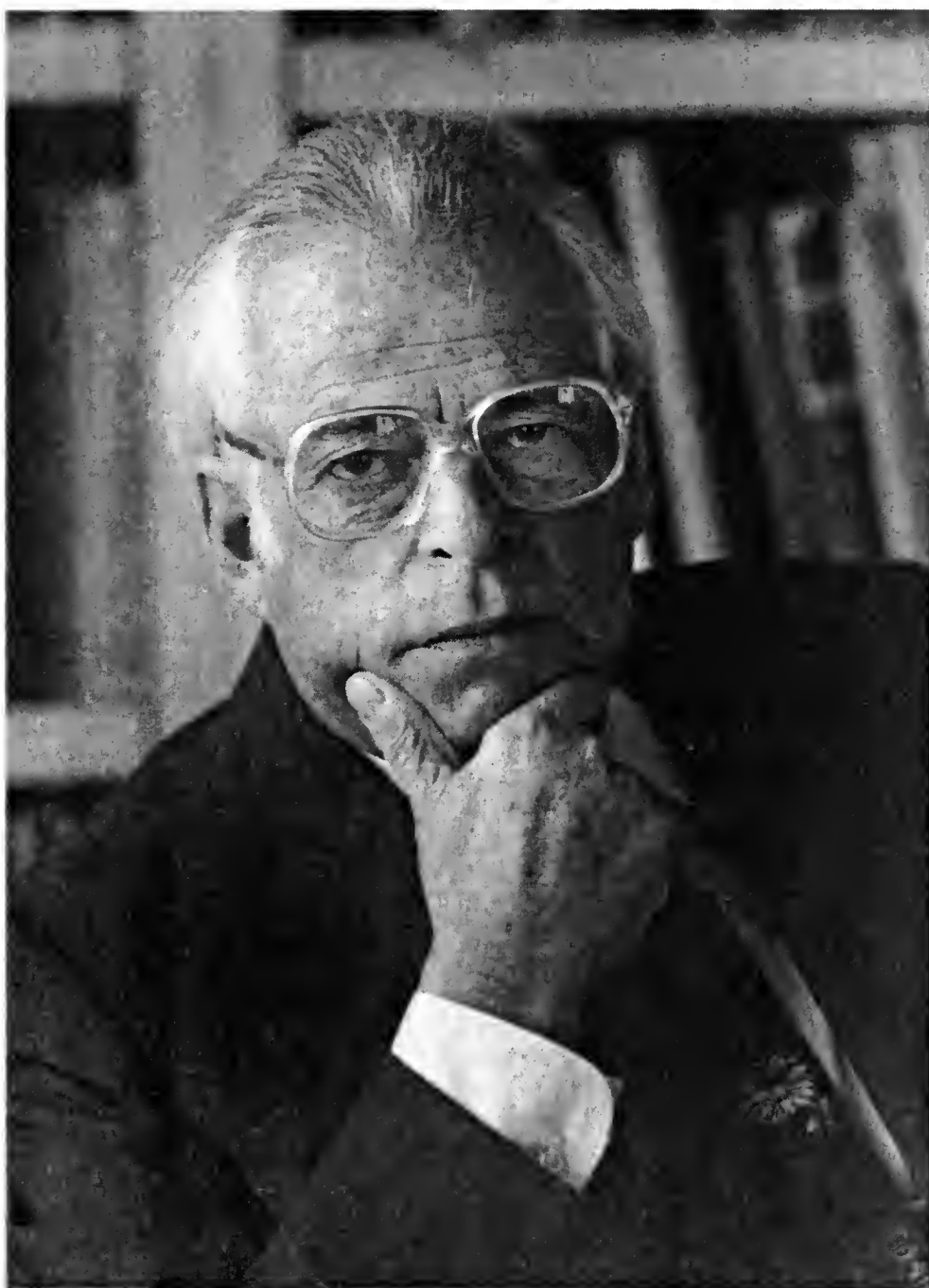
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1981

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PREFACE

Kurt Herbert Adler has been described as the last of the great operatic impresarios. Known as "the Maestro" at San Francisco Opera during his twenty-eight-year reign as general director (1953-1981), he built the company into one of the world's great houses, respected for its strong repertoire, collective artistry, and quality in all aspects of production.

Adler controlled every detail of every opera performance, from casting to curtain. He was a skillful labor negotiator, a remarkable fund-raiser, and in addition to all his other duties, he managed to conduct more than a hundred performances for the company during his tenure.

All of Adler's energies were devoted to opera production, and he demanded equal dedication from his staff and artists. Leontyne Price, who got her first stage break from him and returned the favor many times over, recalls the Adler temperament: "He was strong, opinionated, devious, affectionate, elegant, caring, vindictive, argumentative, ruthless, determined, egomaniacal, charming, loving, sentimental and extremely successful."

Adler booked the artists, balanced the repertoire, presided over the home season and the road tours, edited practically every word of print that left the opera house, courted divas and wealthy patrons alike, and tallied the box office receipts. Best known for his discoveries, Adler gave U.S. debuts to Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Leontyne Price, Birgit Nilsson, Leonie Rysanek, Anja Silja, Anna Tomowa-Sintow, Stuart Burrows, Sir Geraint Evans and Ingvar Wixell, to name but a few luminaries. Out of loyalty to Adler, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle and Luciano Pavarotti made San Francisco their home company, the place where many of their first designs and first roles would be seen and heard.

Under Adler San Francisco heard Licia Albanese's first Desdemona, Renata Scotto's first Adriana Lecouvreur, and Montserrat Caballe's first Turandot, and if the singers complained that Adler's theater was too big and too far away from the action in London, Milan and Munich and that his fees were too low, they came, they sang, and they returned.

Adler founded an operatic empire in an area with a relatively small funding base, and the pressure of fund-raising was a major factor in his decision to retire in 1981. He pioneered in the development of young American artists with the creation of Spring Opera Theater and Western Opera Theater, all the while offering some of the most adventurous repertoire in the country and winning for himself the title "the Czar of Opera" from the New York Times.

Few would disagree that Adler was a difficult, tyrannical character or that he created crisis after crisis just to keep the operatic juices flowing. Of his legendary temper he said that it made for "artistic tension, which is good for success." He added: "I didn't have the time to be sweet and nice. Maybe not the personality, but certainly not the time." Still, he had an undeniable genius for producing the lyric art, and the great artists of our time traveled to the West Coast for the privilege of working with him. Pavarotti, when asked about Adler, said: "Is he dittoriale? Are we joking? He is the most, but his company is running the best in the world."

Adler is central to the oral history of the San Francisco Opera, but he is not the only character. The story begins with Gaetano Merola, who considered the city "my other Italy" and believed in its ability to support an opera company of its own. Merola launched the company in 1922 in the Stanford University Stadium, where audiences of more than ten thousand came to hear Giovanni Martinelli and Bianca Saroya at five dollars top. Merola ran the company until his death in 1953, and nearly all of the world's best-known singers graced his stage.

In order to broaden the history, therefore, it was decided some time during Adler's sessions to conduct shorter focused interviews with artists, staff, and others who had been important to the development of the company, as well as family and friends.

Those interviews--thirty-five in all--were conducted in various ways and places. One week I talked to Birgit Nilsson in soprano Carol Vaness's New York apartment and the following week interviewed Carol Vaness, who had returned to New York, by telephone from San Francisco. Leontyne Price's brother, General George Price, kindly ran through the list of interview questions with Miss Price and tape-recorded her responses; Sir Geraint sent his taped thoughts from England. I was able to sit down with Jean-Pierre Ponnelle on a short break between rehearsals of Falstaff, the last production he did in San Francisco before his death just months afterward. Tim Pfaff conducted interviews with Leonie Rysanek and staff member Ruth Felt.

We were able to document the profound and long-lasting involvement of Robert Watt Miller with the company through interviews with his widow, Mrs. Sheldon Cooper, and R. Gwin Follis, a close friend and board chairman from 1971 to 1984. Nancy Miller Adler was a bridge from Robert Watt Miller, a first cousin of her father's, to the later Adler years. Colin Harvey, a veteran of forty-six seasons with the company (chorister, comprimario and librarian), covered certain aspects of the Merola years, and others shed significant light on opera production and on San Francisco as a cultural community. Not surprisingly, a treasury of opera anecdote has accumulated on tape: stories of diva's quirks and tenor's idiosyncrasies, classic bailouts and crises, near misses and grand successes.

Work on the oral history was often interrupted when additional funding had to be brought in, a difficult task in the music world, where institution boards and patrons are constantly being asked to contribute to the performances themselves. Nancy Adler was able to direct a portion of a gift from the Richard Tucker Foundation to the project; other funding was received in large and small amounts from opera angels, and long-time opera staff member Evelyn Pantages kindly asked for memorial donations to the project in memory of George Pantages, for several decades the opera's lighting technician.

We would like to thank the following individuals, whose encouragement and support have made the oral history possible. Special thanks are due to Jillian Sandrock and the Skaggs Foundation, who initiated the project with a seed grant, to former University Librarian Joseph Rosenthal, who helped with support from the Library Fund, and to James D. Hart, the late director of The Bancroft Library, who persuaded Maestro Adler to undertake the oral history. Our advisors helped greatly with suggestions and access to research materials. Thanks to community leaders Otto Meyer, Mrs. Sheldon Cooper, Gwin Follis, and Walter Baird for helping raise funds in the first years of the project, and to Ann Flinn and Nancy Adler for the final funding phase in 1994 to bring the transcripts to completion. An offer from Jimmy Schwabacher to celebrate the completion with a gala party spurred the efforts on. Thanks to Arthur Kaplan for his final proofreading of over 1300 pages.

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Caroline Crawford
Interviewer-Editor

October 1994
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University of California, Berkeley

Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera

Interviewees

Volume I, The Life and Career of Kurt Herbert Adler: 1905-1985

Interviews with Kurt Herbert Adler

Volume II, Artists and Staff of the San Francisco Opera

Interviews with Leontyne Price, Birgit Nilsson, Leonie Rysanek, Sir Geraint Evans, Ingvar Wixell, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, Jess Thomas, Carol Vaness, Gerald Freedman, Wolfram Skalicki, Dorothy Kirsten, Luciano Pavarotti, Matthew Farruggio, John Priest, Richard Rodzinski, Ruth Felt, Richard Bradshaw, Evelyn Crockett and George Pantages

Volume III, Community and Union Leaders, Family and Friends

Interviews with R. Gwin Follis, Betty Folger Miller Cooper, Prentis Cobb Hale, Walter Baird, Jerry Spain, William Diedrich, Eddie Powell, Don Tayer, Arthur Bloomfield, James Matheson, James Schwabacher, Alfred Fromm, Otto Meyer, Nancy Miller Adler, Kristin Adler Krueger, Dr. Walter Strauss, and Martin Magner

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Joseph Kerman, professor of music

INTRODUCTION--by Beverly Sills

Kurt Adler was the best opera impresario I have ever known. Tough, noisy, autocratic and a relentless perfectionist, he brought the San Francisco Opera to a heady era of excitement and success. Every major opera singer, conductor, director--indeed right across the operatic board--wanted to work with him. Yes, we all loved to visit San Francisco which greeted us with warmth and adoration. But so did a lot of other cities. Yes, San Francisco Opera paid us well. But so did a lot of other opera companies.

It was Kurt.

He was tough--but he was fair. He yelled a lot, but if you yelled back he listened. He was autocratic, but he could afford to be; he knew his business. He was a perfectionist, yet he never demanded the impossible. Being perfect was not necessarily impossible to Kurt.

When in the early 1980s I was the new General Director of the New York City Opera it was to him that I turned for advice and after his administration that I modelled my own.

He was above all my friend. They say if you leave this world with friends who will miss you, you leave a rich man. Kurt left a millionaire.

Beverly Sills
General Director, New York City Opera

June 1988
New York City, New York

INTRODUCTION by Roger L. Stevens

Artists and supporters of the arts in this country are fortunate that Kurt Herbert Adler chose to make the United States of America his home after he was forced to flee from his native Austria. We all benefited from the extraordinary talents of this outstanding man.

I first became acquainted with Kurt as a member of the music panel of the National Arts Council. With other distinguished musicians, he gave it the impetus it needed to get organized in a professional and artistic way. When he finally became a member of the Council itself, it seemed to thrill him as much as the first time he received an award and, of course, during his lifetime he received many. While serving on the Arts Council, he never missed a meeting, taking in his stride the frequent long trips from San Francisco. His enthusiasm and vitality impressed all of us and was, no doubt, a major contributing factor in the Council attaining the important status it has in the country today.

Kurt had his inaugural season with the San Francisco Opera in 1954. The immediate impact of his work was reported by the famous critic Alfred Frankenstein as "the most interesting in local operatic history. This new regime promised much and it fulfilled every one of its commitments, often more brilliantly than anyone expected." In spite of the vicissitudes of managing an opera company, and the obstacles that loom up out of thin air, his productions always stood out as among the best in the nation. Needless to say, along the way he discovered many singers and composers who are now superstars of great renown, firmly placing him as a leader in the world of opera.

Kurt was a man of great charm. I was privileged to enjoy many dinners in his company and to have the opportunity to meet the charming Mrs. Adler. Men such as Kurt are few and far between and the music world will feel his loss deeply.

Roger L. Stevens
John F. Kennedy Center for
the Performing Arts

January 1989
Washington, D.C.

INTRODUCTION--by Lotfi Mansouri

There are few people in the history of opera who have had the long-lasting and far-reaching impact of Kurt Herbert Adler. He was truly the last of the old-style European impresarios and San Francisco Opera blossomed during the nearly thirty years of his powerful guidance. I knew the man very well, having directed thirty-four productions at the War Memorial Opera House during eighteen seasons of his tenure. Now, following in his footsteps as general director of the company, it is clear just how significant his legacy is and how fantastic his vision was. Though Adler possessed many extraordinary gifts, perhaps the greatest was his uncanny nose for talent--his ability to recognize important artists early in their development and introduce them to the opera world. Literally scores of singers, conductors, directors, and designers made their American debuts at San Francisco Opera because of Adler's sixth sense.

The great Leontyne Price not only made her American debut at the War Memorial Opera House under Adler, but was first seen in several of her most famous roles here--including *Aida* and both *Leonoras*. Luciano Pavarotti sang "Nessun dorma" in *Turandot* for the first time on any stage at our opera house, as well as his well known roles in *Aida*, *Un Ballo in Maschera* and many others. Marie Collier, Brigit Nilsson, Leonie Rysanek, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Anja Silja, Ingvar Wixell, Geraint Evans, Giuseppe Taddei, Jess Thomas, and many more legendary singers came here first because of Adler--and then returned many times because of him, too. Director Jean-Pierre Ponnelle not only made his U.S. debut here, but for many years made his North American home at San Francisco Opera creating some of his most exciting work--again, thanks to Kurt Adler.

Because of his concern for nurturing and properly training young singers, in 1954 Adler started creating the educational and artist training programs that, since 1982, have been administered by the San Francisco Opera Center--the Merola Opera Program, Western Opera Theater, Brown Bag Opera, and the San Francisco/Affiliate Artists-Opera Program (later renamed the Adler Fellowship Program). Today, these are recognized internationally for seeking out gifted young singers from around the world and caring for them, providing a coordinated sequence of performance and study opportunities. Such internationally applauded artists as Janis Martin, Ann Panagoulas, Ruth Ann Swenson, Carol Vaness, Deborah Voigt, Dolores Zediker, Brian Asawa, Craig Estep, Thomas Hampson, David Malis, and many others started their careers here--again because of the vision the Adler held for this company.

Adler was tough; an uncompromising perfectionist who very rarely gave a complement. You might never hear a kind word from the man, but when he asked you back, it was his sign of approval--and that was his

way. Much of the strength of San Francisco Opera, and that of many other companies internationally, exists because of the strength and insight of this remarkable man. There will never be another like him.

Lotfi Mansouri, General Director
San Francisco Opera

October 1994
San Francisco, California

VOLUME HISTORY--Kurt Herbert Adler and the San Francisco Opera, Volume I,
The Life and Career of Kurt Herbert Adler: 1905-1985

Kurt Herbert Adler was asked to record his oral history with the Regional Oral History Office in 1984, three years after his retirement as director of the San Francisco Opera. Jillian Sandrock, a program officer of the Skaggs Foundation and former opera staff member, suggested him as an interviewee, and the Foundation offered partial funding to get the project underway. Adler agreed and regular recording sessions were begun.

Timothy Pfaff conducted the interviews from January through July, 1985, and when he was forced to leave the project because of other duties, I became interviewer and editor for the project.

The Adler interviews, forty-odd hours in all, took place at the Adler home in Ross, where he and Nancy Adler had moved in 1980. Most of the sessions were held in Adler's downstairs study, where framed photographs and drawings of Toscanini, with whom he had worked in the 1930s in Salzburg, and Verdi, were prominent. In that room he studied scores and prepared for conducting assignments. Quite often during the recording and editing sessions, his two young children, Sabrina, six, and Roman, four, would run in during taping with something to show or ask him, or Nancy Adler would deliver pungent cups of espresso.

Such a suburban, pastoral environment might seem an unlikely setting for Adler, but in his study was a well-stocked score library and the ebony Yamaha grand piano the company had given him on his retirement. More importantly, he was connected with the outside world and specifically to the international opera network day and night by telephone, much as he had been at the opera, switching easily from his heavily accented English into Italian, German or French as needed.

Interviewer Tim Pfaff prepared lists of questions for the interviews, but Adler's mind was too quick and too full of opera lore to stick very closely to them. Sometimes his thoughts ranged from remembered performances of the 1920s to the present--operatic moments that were the special Sternstunde or "star hours" that opera legends are made of.

Some sessions focus narrowly on such subjects as Adler's childhood and remembrances of his Viennese past, of Strauss and Mahler and the years spent observing and studying at the Vienna Opera. Other subjects include casting and the selection of repertoire, lighting, color in design and music, and specific personalities who were, in his estimation, "right for the times." Some of the individuals who belong in this category are Paul Hager, Wolfram Skalicki, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, and an

Adler protege whose tragic death brought to a close a remarkable life and career--Calvin Simmons.

Much of Adler's attention focused on the repertoire of the growing company: the world, American and local premieres of works by Cherubini, Orff, Walton, Poulenc, Janacek, Britten, Massenet, and Strauss, among others, and the impressive list of artists who made American debuts during his tenure.

When the interviews were finished, the process of transcribing was begun, a difficult task because of the German accent and syntax, and when Mr. Adler saw the transcriptions, he was not pleased. He had always been a painstaking editor, reviewing every bit of correspondence and publicity that left the house, and he thought his texts were disjointed and ungrammatical. In fact, he insisted that the initial interview be redone, because he wanted to paint a picture of his childhood and his family that was more precise than the original one.

Early in 1988, Dita Pepin and I were working with Mr. Adler on the transcripts at his home in Marin County. The telephone rang, and Dita, a favorite secretary from the 1970s who came several days a week to help with correspondence, answered it. It was Adler's old friend from Reichenberg days, theater director Martin Wagner, inviting Adler to the premiere of his new show in Los Angeles. "Should I go?" he asked. "Why not?" He marked the date on his calendar.

Several more calls came in and then someone called from the San Francisco Chronicle with the news that his successor Terry McEwen had just resigned as director of the company. He told them he had no comment, and after he had finished the conversation, he began to muse about who might lead the company. He thought he might step back in on an interim basis.

Adler's death the next afternoon took the music community by surprise. In the months that followed, Nancy Adler donated his collected papers to The Bancroft Library to supplement the oral history, and we set about editing the bulk of the raw transcripts, a difficult task with Mr. Adler, but a much more difficult task without him.

Kurt Herbert Adler had the distinction of being called tyrannical, dictatorial, autocratic, but he was never boring, and his tape-recorded story is also never boring. He is as candid about his personal dislikes as he is about the things he did that were less than successful, and about what frustrated and taxed him. We were privileged to record his memoirs during his lifetime, because he was able to talk about his work with the kind of detail no one else could have.

Following Adler's death in February, 1988, his widow Nancy Adler, in accordance with his wishes, donated his collected papers to The Bancroft Library to supplement the oral history, so that the resulting collection is a complete and vibrant archive of his life and time.

Every effort has been made to present his words as he spoke them, retaining his somewhat formal manner of expressing himself, and the vigor of his ideas and his delivery.

Caroline Crawford
Interviewer-Editor

April 1992
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

Kurt Adler, Conductor Who Led San Francisco Opera, Dies at 82

By JOHN ROCKWELL

Kurt Herbert Adler, a Viennese-born conductor who led the San Francisco Opera for 28 years until his retirement in 1981, died of a heart attack Tuesday evening at his home in Ross, Calif., a suburb north of San Francisco. He was 82 years old.

Mr. Adler's death followed by only a few hours the announcement that his successor, Terence A. McEwen, would retire because of acute diabetes.

During his tenure with the company, Mr. Adler shaped it into one of the leading opera ensembles of the world.

The San Francisco Opera was founded in 1923 by Mr. Adler's predecessor, Gaetano Merola, who had a natural predilection for Italian repertory. Mr. Adler brought a different spirit, more oriented toward German repertory, modernism and innovative stage direction. He expanded the repertory, introduced many young singers both European and American, developed summer, apprentice and touring programs and presided over a vast expansion of the season and the budget.

An imperious, crusty figure who involved himself with every aspect of the company's operations, Mr. Adler personified opera in San Francisco during the 1950's, 60's and 70's. A brooding bust of the general director, arms crossed and scowling like Beethoven, was installed in the lobby of the War Memorial Opera House long before his retirement.

Born in 1905 in Vienna and educated at the academy and university, Mr. Adler made his debut as a conductor in 1925 at Max Reinhardt's theater in his native city. He subsequently conducted in opera houses in Germany, Italy and Czechoslovakia, and assisted Arturo Toscanini at the 1936 Salzburg Festival.

Emigrating to the United States in 1938, initially for an engagement at the Chicago Opera, he became a United States citizen in 1941. In 1943 he joined the staff of the San Francisco Opera as chorus master, at first commuting from New York. He was appointed artistic director in 1953 and general director in 1956. Following his retirement on Dec. 31, 1981, he was named general director emeritus.

When Mr. Adler took over the company in 1953, its season lasted five weeks. At his retirement, it stretched from Labor Day through December, with added spring and summer seasons.

Operas given their American pre-

mieres during his tenure included Britten's "Midsummer Night's Dream," Richard Strauss's "Frau Ohne Schatten" and Poulenc's "Dialogues of the Carmelites."

In addition to an unusually wide range of standard and not-so-standard repertory, other novelties included Cherubini's "Portuguese Inn," Honegger's "Joan of Arc at the Stake," Walton's "Troilus and Cressida," Orff's "Wise Maiden," Norman Dello Joio's "Blood Moon," Shostakovich's "Katerina Ismailova," Robert Ward's "Crucible," Douglas Moore's "Carry Nation," Gunther Schuller's "Visitation," Aribert Reimann's "Lear" and a triple bill of the Weill-Schuller "Royal Palace," Schoenberg's "Erwartung" and the "Discovery of America" portion of Milhaud's "Christopher Columbus."

More than 300 singers, conductors, directors and designers made their American debuts with the San Francisco Opera under Mr. Adler's auspices. They included Boris Christoff, Geraint Evans, August Everding, Tito Gobbi, Sena Jurinac, Pilar Lorengar, Marlo Del Monaco, Birgit Nilsson, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, Leontyne Price, Margaret Price, Mstislav Rostropovich, Leonie Rysanek, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Giulietta Simionato, Georg Solti and Renata Tebaldi.

Mr. Adler is survived by his wife, Nancy; two daughters, Kristin Krueger of Clayton, Calif., and Sabrina, of Ross; two sons, Ronald, of Munich, West Germany, and Roman, of Ross, and two grandchildren.

I VIENNA: 1905 TO 1928

[Interview 20: July 8, 1985] ##¹

The Early Years

Pfaff: When and where were you born?

Adler: I was born in Vienna, in 1905, on the second of April. I was a premature child--I think I was a seven-month baby--and I was born on a Sunday night at 11:30 p.m. There is a saying--or was, at least--in Austria, that a child born on a Sunday would be a lucky person. So my mother absolutely wanted a Sunday child, and she made every effort that I would be born on Sunday, the second, and not on Monday, the third, as it appeared I would. I was born at home. It was customary in Europe then that children were born in the home of parents who had an adequate apartment, and not in hospitals. And so it was.

We stayed in that apartment until 1907. That means I was two years plus when we moved to the next apartment, in a house in which we remained until 1934. Strangely enough, I remember the moving and the arriving in this apartment. It was a very light apartment, surrounded by gardens and trees, while the other one had been in the real city, you know, without trees, only with noise, and near a railroad station with steam locomotives which one heard--I don't remember seeing them when I was that young, but I remember the noise.

I started going to school in Vienna when I was about six, and I went to what would be primary or grammar school--I am really not quite familiar yet, probably never will be, with the way you describe it here--in Vienna. I went to a private school which had five grades. But, being a good student and ahead of my classmates, they made me skip the fifth grade, and I went after four years to

¹This symbol (##) indicates that a tape or a segment has begun or ended. For a guide to the tapes see page following transcript.

the Gymnasium, all within five minutes of my parents' apartment, the schools being next to each other.

In the first school there were boys and girls, coeducation, and there was in my class a boys' party and a girls' party. Well, in the girls' party I was the only boy, and the girls considered me as their leader. In the Gymnasium, there were mainly boys and a very few girls; there were about two or three out of, it must have been, twenty-five or twenty-eight boys in my class.

The Gymnasium takes eight years. It was the kind of school where you started Latin in the first year and studied Latin for eight years. As a matter of fact, I liked it, and was not only able to read old Latin literature, but was even able to speak some Latin. In the third year, we began with Greek, and I never got very far with that language, because at that time I was already studying music, and spending a lot of my time on musical studies. So, I wasn't as strong in Greek as I was in Latin, which, incidentally, showed up during the final test at the Abiturium, as they call it, after eight years.

Pfaff: Abiturium?

Adler: Abitur. In Vienna, they call it Matura, which has to do with getting mature, I suppose. The Greek test we had was from Plato. It was extremely difficult. I really couldn't translate it, but I took a crack at it, and somehow sensed what the philosophy expressed in the excerpt we had to translate meant. And, after the teacher had read my paper, he said to me, "I never knew that you knew so much Greek." And I modestly said, "I really don't."

So, there you have twelve years before you enter the university--

Pfaff: Can I stop and ask one question? This primary school that you were describing earlier--is that the one we identified as the Volksschule?

Adler: Correct; Volksschule is correct. That is normally five years, and I think that of those four years are obligatory. Afterwards I am not sure if you had to continue in schools or not, but it was obvious for me that I had to go to another school, either the Gymnasium, or there was something else which was called Realgymnasium, which had Latin and French or Latin and English classes, and was more a preparation for the technical university, while the Gymnasium was a preparation for the university. That's where I went.

I had started French at home, when I was about five or six years old. My parents could speak French, and we spoke for several

years: nothing but French, no German. Later on it was English, and thereafter, Italian. I wasn't very happy with my parents making me study so many languages, but I was grateful later on, when I noticed that my profession made the knowledge of languages a must.

Parents: Ernst and Ida Adler

Pfaff: Who was your mother, and what was her background?

Adler: My mother was born Bauer, Ida Bauer, and some of her ancestors came from Czechoslovakia. She grew up in Vienna, and spoke only very little Czech. Her father, Filip Bauer, whom I recall as an especially kind man, was a textile manufacturer. He had factories in Bohemia, which at that time was a part of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, Austro-Hungarian Empire, if you wish.

My father, Ernst Adler, was born in Budapest, but his parents died, I believe, when he was a baby; I certainly didn't know them. He grew up in Vienna in the house of the famous actor, Adolph Ritter von Sonnenthal, who was made a nobleman by the Emperor Franz Joseph. He was one of the most famous actors in the Burgtheater, which was the imperial, legitimate theater. Sonnenthal and Kainz, Joseph Kainz, are the names one remembers most from the turn of the century, and slightly before, as the most successful and prominent actors in the capital of Austria. My father tried, from what I've heard, to imitate Sonnenthal, who was a very elegant man, at least as far as clothing goes. I've seen photos of my father in his young years where he wore the same clothes as I have recognized in photos of Sonnenthal.

Dr. Otto Bauer

Adler: When my father met my mother and married her, which was 1903, my grandfather proposed to my father that he enter the factories as an associate, because his son, Otto Bauer, was not willing to enter manufacturing to make a living. He was, already in his young years, a Social Democrat--an incredibly clever and talented man. He wrote a Napoleon drama when he was seven or eight years old, yet it is really quite an opus. I have the manuscript of it. After the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, he became the first Secretary of Foreign Affairs for the new Austrian Republic. He was furthered by an older Social Democrat with the name of Viktor Adler--no relative. He was the leader of the party; he

liked my uncle very much, and it was he who opened the doors for his political career.

Pfaff: You mean Otto Bauer's career.

Adler: Yes. I had a problem with his being so intelligent and having this incredible memory. I have never met anybody with such a memory. He wrote volumes of books, and, when he quoted, he quoted from memory. Only the proofreaders would check his quotes, and, as I understood, hardly ever was there an error. And he was not only practically a genius in the field of politics and social development, but in everything he touched. He was brilliant in all respects; there is no other word.

Pfaff: What was the extent of your exposure to him?

Adler: My mother adored him; they were very close. And, that way, I was included. When the monarchy changed to a democratic republic, the boy, Kurt, then thirteen years old, was naturally incredibly impressed with what was happening: history! That's what I felt was going on. And through my uncle, I met many politicians of the Social Democratic Party. Austria's first president, Karl Seitz, who was a great admirer of my uncle's, took me to his heart, and it was through him that I had the all-important access to the former imperial royal box at the opera house in Vienna.

The box, directly above the pit, belonged to the government. Well, the government changed. But I, who had been invited by Seitz to attend any performance I wanted to attend, was turned over to the next government like a part of the furniture. They would say, "Well, there's a young man who studies music, and he comes rather frequently--sometimes just for a very short time, sometimes for the whole opera--he sits in the back and brings his scores, and follows the music and studies. And you have certainly no objections if he continues to be there." And so it was; for years I went to this box.

Memories of the Vienna Opera: Franz Schalk

Pfaff: How old were you when you first started going to the box?

Adler: I was about thirteen, fourteen years old, but at that time, I didn't go too often.

There was another small problem: my father, who was more or less on the capitalist side, didn't like it too much if I went to this "Social-Democratic" box, you know? But he got used to it, and

the more I studied music, the more he realized how good it was for me, how important the attendance of those performances was. He did something else. He was a bridge partner of the then-opera director, Franz Schalk. And Mr. Schalk invited me to attend any rehearsal I wanted to attend. So, if I wanted to, I could start in the morning and stay in the opera house until night.

Franz Schalk was a conductor, first, of the Vienna Opera, who came there, if I am not mistaken, in 1898. It was Gustav Mahler--he was already director--who brought him there. Schalk became opera director in 1918, and had Richard Strauss as an associate director for several years. When Strauss left, Schalk remained alone, and resigned in either 1927 or '28, and died of tuberculosis.

If you want a little incident, he was, at that time, living in a sanatorium not quite two hours from Vienna, where the air was excellent, mountain air. He came back for one week and conducted three performances: Tristan, Ariadne, and Götterdämmerung.

The Tristan went well, and I attended. Ariadne I did not attend, but I heard that it was not good. He was tired, being very, very sick and all. And then the Götterdämmerung is unforgettable to me, because--at that time, for some reason, I was on the fourth gallery, standing room--when he conducted the funeral march, Siegfried's funeral march, funeral music, in the last act, I really was under the impression that he was conducting his own funeral music.

My recollection tells me that, after the performance was over, I remained there standing on the fourth gallery, and I looked down and I saw this man, of whom I was very, very fond, sitting at the conductor's stand and not moving. He had a little goatee, and he had his head in his hand. The orchestra got up and they left--it was not customary in Vienna at that time that the musicians had to wait for the conductor before they could leave the pit, as it is here now--but Schalk was more or less alone in this enormous pit. He looked around--and that is when I had the feeling, "One will not see him here anymore." And so it was. Not so long after that, he died.

Schalk is a man to whom I owe my dedication to the works of Wagner: he was an outstanding Wagner conductor, and Mozart, Strauss. Strauss used to say, "Schalk conducts Rosenkavalier better than I." Fidelio. Die Frau ohne Schatten was also, incidentally, a master example of his conducting skills. In the concert hall, he did quite a bit of oratorio. He was a pupil or a friend of Bruckner's, and he conducted Bruckner better than anyone else. He was open to contemporary music, and there's a story of how he conducted a work by Stravinsky in the concert hall with the

Philharmonic, and the people were booing during the performance--not at the end--and screaming, "Stop! Stop! Play Bruckner! Play Bruckner!" And Schalk went on and finished the work without interruption. And when someone discussed it with him afterwards, he said, "Well, you know, the people who were screaming, 'Play Bruckner,' are the same who, when I played Bruckner first, were screaming, 'Stop! Play Fux! Play Fux!'" Schalk was a very witty, sarcastic man.

He had a very personal conducting technique, to which the orchestra was used, of course, after so many years. His beat was not a very clear or precise beat. And there is an incredible story how he went once to the Stockholm Opera to conduct Lohengrin, which was one of the operas he did all the time. He didn't come to the performance because the orchestra simply couldn't play under him, so Schalk left and went home. There is also a famous story that he never gave very clear upbeats, but [rather] he gave a downbeat and waited for the orchestra to come in. And when his successor, Clemens Krauss, who was a perfectionist as far as beat went, tried to rehearse with the orchestra to play with an upbeat--and it took him quite a bit of rehearsal, for instance, for the attack in the Meistersinger Prelude, which was his first opera--well, Clemens Krauss thought he had trained the orchestra how to react to upbeats. And he came to the performance, he gave a wonderful upbeat--nothing happened. And so he went down, and he waited, and the orchestra attacked the same way it had attacked for years under Schalk.

That reminds me of another anecdote about upbeats. Furtwängler was conducting Götterdämmerung at that time, and, as you remember, the Götterdämmerung introduction starts with an E-flat minor chord in the woodwinds. They are not easy to play together. One of the musicians asked his colleague next to him, "Can you tell me why Furtwängler doesn't give an upbeat?" And the answer was, "That is very wise, because, when we know that he doesn't give an upbeat, we depend on ourselves and we come in together. And that would not necessarily be the case if Furtwängler gave an upbeat." It's a true story.

So, we go back to Schalk. In the late twenties, I could have started as coach at the opera, but I refused, because I did not want to base my professional career on personal relationships, or Protektion, as it was called in Vienna. It had a very evil taste.

First Music Lessons: Irene Bien

Adler: When I was about five years old, my parents had me take piano lessons. I had been exposed to music, because my father loved music, and was a lousy, amateur composer. When he came home from his office, he would sit down at the organ or at the grand piano. I would sit underneath and listen to his rather cheap improvisations, but I adored it.

That was my first experience with music. The first music teacher I had was a lady called Irene Bien, who was a pupil of Arnold Schoenberg. Now, Miss Bien certainly did a lot for me, but she also made life difficult, because, for a boy of six or seven to be exposed, as first harmony studies, to Schoenberg's harmony studies, is not easy to do. But I remember, when, some ten or twelve years later, I came to Alexander Wunderer or to the Music Academy, harmony was very easy for me, much less of an enigma than it was when I was six.

Pfaff: Was Bien your piano teacher?

Adler: She was my music teacher. She taught me also Emile Dalcroze, which is a eurhythmic exercise invented by Dalcroze, who was, I believe, a French-Swiss composer. It expresses music in movement. So you would listen to music and start at first to walk to it, and make movements with your legs, with your body, with your arms, with your head. And it ends up with something that is almost like conducting. I remember that, even as a child, I had to be able to conduct with one arm four beats, and with the other arm, three. That was Irene Bien.

I couldn't reach the pedal of the piano, so my father constructed some kind of an attachment, a board, to the piano, which my short legs could reach, so probably I used it in abundance.

Ernst Adler: Composer and Music Lover

Adler: Speaking about my father, he was in a position to hire orchestras, and he listened to his not-very-good music by hiring an orchestra to play it. Some of his works were also published, by Doblinger in Vienna, a firm that still exists. I always wanted to find out if there are any plates left, because now even his bad music would interest me.

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Adler: [My] father was also an admirer of the first record players, which played with a big horn and an incredible weight, and the records also were heavy. He had an enormous collection of recordings. And he owned what probably was the first portable record player. He had a trunk which he designed built specially so he could take the record player, the horn, and a fairly large number of records along when he traveled. I was terribly impressed--not necessarily favorably, because my mother made fun of my father's addiction to the portable record player.

I should mention something else about him: he was one of the first individuals to own a private car in Vienna, around 1900. Later on, he did not keep cars in Vienna, but rather he kept them at the factories in Bohemia, because he did not wish for me to grow up as a child who had a car at his disposal. That seemed to my parents as something one just didn't do, if one didn't want to be considered nouveau riche or whatever.

Outings in the Prater

Adler: My father had a cousin--the composer Rudolph Reti, who actually died in this country--and Reti was a composer and pianist. He gave recitals in the famous old Bösendörfersaal. Bösendörfer was the piano builder, and there was a little hall named after him, which was very exclusive and where very special recitals took place. As a child, I had to go to some of Mr. Reti's recitals, sitting impatiently in the first row with white gloves, because a child of my standing and class had to wear white gloves for a recital, and I hated it. I had also to wear those white gloves when, on Sundays, we rode in a two-horse carriage taking either my grandfather, my mother and me, or my father, my mother and me to the Prater, which was "the thing to do." The Prater is a very beautiful place, and not only the amusement park, which most people know. It has lovely meadows and woodsy parts, and it is not so far from the Danube. We went in this carriage, and I had to have my hands in my lap with the white gloves--and I was annoyed that I couldn't go in dirty clothes to the Prater, where the amusement park was.

On June 28th, 1914--I was nine years old--we (my parents and the family of one of the most prominent directors of a main bank in Vienna) were on the Kalmberg in the Kaffeerestaurant for coffee in the afternoon. A military band was playing. Suddenly, the bank director was called to the telephone. An instant later the band stopped playing, and when the bank director came back, he said, "The Crown Prince has been shot in Sarajevo." And of course,

everybody felt that was not the end of it, and felt what was coming, which was the First World War.

Speaking about music, it was amazing to the ears of a child that a military band stopped in the middle of the bar.

Family Friends

Adler: Otherwise, in my early childhood, I recall that my parents were friends of such "typical Viennese" philosophers as Egon Friedell, a doctor of philosophy who killed himself when Hitler came, and Peter Altenberg, the poet. And my father was a friend of a painter; I have prints in my house, prints of works by this man, not only purchased in Europe, but also in the United States, where he lived for a while. But what I grew up with were originals, because he was a friend of my father's.

As a child I was brought up as a typical bourgeois child, where money was available (which I did not know), but also as a child who had an insight into the ideals and philosophy of the Social Democrats who took over in 1918. Took over in Austria, I should say--as well as in Germany.

In 1918 my father was still in the Austrian army, although he was an invalid because he had a very bad ear problem, which was caused by coming back to Vienna from the Polish front too late for an operation. He lost his hearing in the left ear, and also it affected his entire nervous system in a very adverse way. But he was still in the Ministry of War, active in the army, until 1918. My mother and I were in Czechoslovakia, which at that time was still Bohemia, at the house of a friend of the family whose name was Dr. Richard Strauss, but not the composer: he was also a manufacturer, textile manufacturer.

One day, there was a vocal score of Die Walküre on the piano, and I sat down and sightread the score. I'd never seen a Walküre score, or heard the opera. And Dr. Strauss told my mother that he was completely flabbergasted at the way the boy--I would have been thirteen years old--was able to play this. For some reason, he said, some tempi, some phrasing reminded him of what Gustav Mahler had done when he conducted the opera in Vienna. Well, true or not, it's a nice story. It is true that Dr. Strauss said this, because it prompted my mother to look for another music teacher. And I came to Alexander Wunderer.

Studying with Alexander Wunderer

Adler: Alexander Wunderer was the first oboist of the Vienna Philharmonic and the Vienna Opera Orchestra, as well as the president of the Vienna Philharmonic, the president of the International Bach Society, and the president of the International Society for the Normal A. There already was the complaint about orchestras playing at higher and higher pitches, and Wunderer was supposed to be in charge internationally of this problem.

There was a dress rehearsal at the Vienna Opera of Die Walküre. And, of course there were no electronic gadgets yet, but the Vienna Orchestra had some kind of a gadget which they put in the pit, to keep the strings--and it is really not true that it is only the winds; it is the strings which push the pitch up--at the normal A, which, at that time, was 440.

At this dress rehearsal of Die Walküre, they used this gadget, whatever it was, for the first time. Bruno Walter was in the audience at the rehearsal, and came to the pit and went over in the intermission and talked to his friends in the orchestra. And Wunderer said, "Professor Walter, how do you like our new gadget? Didn't we stay on the normal A the whole time during this first act?" Bruno Walter waited a moment, and he said, "Yes, true. But I liked it better the other way."

That influenced Professor Wunderer so much that the same afternoon he resigned as president of the Society of the Normal A, because he said, "If Bruno Walter doesn't care, why should I give so much time to the normal A?"

Pfaff: So the Vienna Philharmonic was playing at a higher pitch at that time?

Adler: Yes.

Pfaff: When they were just here with Bernstein, there was talk about A-452.

Adler: No, I don't believe that. I think 444 approximately, that would be more like it. All orchestras get sharp, because the strings sound more brilliant when they play higher, and so naturally it's very easy for them to drive it up, and then they blame it on the winds. In a pit, when the temperature rises, the pitch goes up, too, and that can hardly be avoided, whatever you try.

At first, Wunderer taught me in his funny studio, high up in an old apartment house near the opera overlooking the Karlsplatz, and not far from the Musikverein, which is a famous music hall

where Brahms, Bruckner, Strauss, and Mahler were performed, and where Philharmonic concerts took place.

There he had a studio where he made his own reeds for the oboe, and where he had every work that Bach had ever written. And this wonderful little man with the little goatee had also--and he would wear it at home--a little black cap, because he was very bald on top, and I guess it must have been cold in his apartment, because, after around 1918, there was no coal to heat apartments in Vienna.

There was also very little light; you had to economize with electricity, and I recall that we used all kind of other lights, not candles so much as kerosene lamps. It's the kind of kerosene that we used in kerosene stoves, because there were no coals to heat the tile stoves which most apartments in Vienna had. He had gas heating, which was impossible, because gas was rationed. Electricity was rationed and gas was rationed. Streetcars were run in a very limited way, and the last streetcar, if I remember right, was leaving the city at about seven-thirty.

Sometimes, when there were opera performances--and they were not nightly; they were announced on very short notice--I walked from home to the opera, which was about an hour. I stood in the standing room for five or six hours if it was Wagner, and I walked home again. And you had to stand in line quite a while also before you could get your tickets. So the whole enterprise was something of ten hours, maybe. But, when you are anxious to hear music, to learn music, to hear more and more music, you do such things.

I kept a kind of diary or journal of the operas and the concerts I attended, and I graded singers and performances and conductors. Unfortunately, I lost all those booklets, but it was "very good, good, poor, mediocre," whatever.

Pfaff: Are you surprised you didn't become a critic?

Adler: I don't think I ever wanted to be a critic, no. But I believe that in Vienna, probably everyone who goes to the standing room, especially, in younger years, acts as a critic. There is a saying, "In Vienna, you don't have one opera director; you have five thousand opera directors," because there are at least five thousand people who attend the opera regularly who think they know better than the director what to do.

Pfaff: When you were studying with Wunderer, was this completely privately, or was it part of school?

The Music Academy and the Conservatory

Adler: At first, completely privately. I was, of course, going to the Gymnasium by then. And then he made me join the Music Academy. And in the Music Academy I studied theory--mainly with Franz Schmidt. Schmidt was a composer who wrote two operas which were quite well-known; one was Notre Dame, and the other Friedegundis. Today they are not so successful. But Notre Dame was actually performed in recent years at the Volksoper in Vienna--successfully, although I really believe that Schmidt's music needs the Vienna Philharmonic. It is music that, when played with an orchestra like the Philharmonic (of which Schmidt was a cellist under Gustav Mahler), it carries you away.

He had also some Hungarian blood, and I remember especially an Intermezzo he did from Notre Dame. I believe that Karajan made a recording of it, with the Berlin Philharmonic. I conducted it with the orchestra of the Vienna Conservatory.

I took conducting classes at the Vienna Conservatory under Rudolf Nilius, an Austrian conductor, who gave the students the opportunity to lead the orchestra, which was quite large. At the Academy, the teacher of the conducting class was a Dutchman who never let the students conduct. Since I felt that this was very important for the development of a young, aspiring musician and conductor, I joined the Conservatory, and there took orchestration and score-reading as well.

I also attended opera classes at the Conservatory. Unforgettable to me was an opera class given by the famous Danish tenor Erik Schmedes, who was singing all the important Heldentenor roles at the opera. He taught mainly by demonstrating. When it came to the Bridal Chamber Scene in Lohengrin, he would pick out a student (usually a pretty student) and act it with this girl. I learned then, already, how the personality and the appearance of the singer had to be respected. Speaking about Lohengrin, I remember how Schmedes taught the Gral narrative.

He, being a very tall man, made gestures when indicating that his father, Parsifal, had a crown. Well, this tall man, raising his arms and his hands to an imaginary crown, looked wonderful. But when the little student tried to do it, it looked kind of ridiculous. Not everybody can act--or interpret, or phrase, or sing--alike. And one has to consider the appearance, the physical ability, the emotional ability, the mental ability of the singer when you ask him to do something.

While at the Conservatory, I conducted also Darius Milhaud's Little Symphonies, and it was unbelievable to me that, when I came to San Francisco, one of the first people I would be introduced to was Darius Milhaud, who was teaching at Mills College then. He asked me to visit him. I heard him, in his house--or, standing outside of his little house, because it was so crowded--a tape of Schoenberg's Moses und Aron which he owned and wanted his friends to listen to. It was the first time that I heard this work, which I consider a masterpiece. Milhaud, later on, conducted also some of his Minute Operas for the Merola program, staged by his wife Madeleine. And, amusingly enough, my wife--who I did not know at that time--studied with the Milhauds when they were in Aspen. So, you see, there are connections, developments, happenings. And Milhaud was a happening. I did perform his opera, Christopher Columbus [in San Francisco], but unfortunately only the second part, because, perhaps wrongly, I thought that the whole work was too much for one evening, and too long, and the second part really contained most of what, at that time, I considered important.

Pfaff: One of the characteristics of your education seems to be that the various kinds of schools overlapped. In what way did they overlap, and what do you make of that today?

Adler: They overlapped entirely, because I was still going to the Gymnasium when I attended, already, the Musikakademie, and I think also the Conservatory. And that was very difficult for a child, because in the Gymnasium, you got assignments. You had to study, you had to learn what they wanted you to learn, and if you didn't do it, you didn't get the grades which made it possible for you to continue. And on top of it, my mother was so ambitious that the best grade was never good enough for her. So I really had to work in the early years at Gymnasium.

At the music schools, it is up to you. You have the opportunity to learn, to study, but there is much more freedom. And you may be admonished to do better if you stay behind for a while, but obviously you don't do this if you feel it is your vocation. But there is no enforcing of the material that you have to learn. That made it difficult.

Studying at the University of Vienna: 1923-1927

Adler: After I had finished the Gymnasium--eight years--and had passed what we called the Matura or Abitur, I went to the Academy, to the Conservatory, and then also to the University. I had been asked by my parents to work for a doctor's degree, any I wished, and I enrolled in the Music History Institute, where the famous

musicologist Professor Guido Adler (again, no relative, but a neighbor of twenty-seven years) was the head. And the main subject was musicology, but the second subject, which you had to have, was philosophy. In music, I passed all oral examinations, and the only thing I didn't finish was my written examination, which had a subject which was not very welcomed by Professor Adler, but which I had received by the other top man while Adler was sick. (That was Professor Robert Lach.) The subject was the influence of [Carl Maria von] Weber on the instrumentation of the young Wagner.

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Adler: Professor Adler had returned from his sick leave, you see, but this theme was really not a theme for a dissertation. But he never assigned another one to me, and I decided, after having taken all of the examinations, that I could write a dissertation at any time. So I took the job as assistant to the opera director in Kaiserslauten when it was offered to me, without finishing the studies for my doctor's degree.

Well, I never wrote a dissertation, but I got several doctor's degrees, honorary doctor's degrees, which prompted my son Ronald, when he was twelve years old (and already didn't like to study in school), to say when I received my first honorary degree, "You see, Daddy, one can become a doctor without studying."

Pfaff: At what point in your growth as a young man, and in your training, did you really feel that music was your vocation?

Adler: I was led by important men, like Wunderer, or like Arnold Rosé, to think about music as a profession. Arnold Rosé was the concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic and the Vienna Opera Orchestra, the head of the famous Rosé Quartet, and, incidentally, the brother-in-law of Gustav Mahler. His daughter, Alma, although she didn't go to my Gymnasium, was the concertmistress in the orchestra of that Gymnasium, which I conducted as a young boy. And after a concert of this orchestra, Professor Rosé came to me and said, "Young man, you have talent as a conductor. Have you thought of becoming a conductor?" And I said, of course, "Frankly, no." But then I started thinking. And Wunderer, who was an extremely wise and flexible man, said, "One never knows. What speaks against it?" And I was fascinated by opera, symphony concerts, and such. And the opportunity to go to the opera (remember the imperial box, or rather the Social Democratic box), or rehearsals at the opera through the bridge partner of my father, Mr. Schalk--all this led my way, I suppose.

Working in the Max Reinhardt Theaters: 1925-1928

Adler: And then came the incident at the Josefstädter Theater, Max Reinhardt's main theater in Vienna. An older colleague, who was a couple of years ahead of me at the University, asked me one day if I could substitute for him at the Reinhardt theater. I said, "Sure; what do you want me to do?" He said, "There's a version of Mendelssohn's Midsummer Night's Dream music, modified by Bernard Paumgartner for the Reinhardt production, in which you must play celeste, if you can do it." And I said, "Sure," and I went. I did all right and two weeks later, I was asked again.

At that time, the conductor noticed me and said, "There you are again. You like it here!" I said, "Yes, very much." He asked, "Would you like to work here?" And I said, "It would be a privilege." So he offered me the opportunity to play the harmonium in the production of Shakespeare's King Lear, which was just starting to be rehearsed by Max Reinhardt. When it came to the pre-dress rehearsals, our little orchestra (remember, I played the harmonium) was playing underneath the stage. Professor Paumgartner wanted to listen to what the orchestra sounded like from the outside, so he asked me if I could conduct some of this music, especially the intermezzi, and I said, "Sure." I conducted, and he went out in the auditorium.

Suddenly, while we were playing, I hear some stamping above me. And the next thing was that a leg came through the weak, old stage floor of the Josefstädter Theater. It was Dr. Paumgartner's leg--he had tried to stop me because there were no electronic connections in those days; that was 1925.

Paumgartner stopped me, all right, but he injured himself. And so I conducted the Lear music. This was my entrance to the Reinhardt stages in Vienna, and I worked three years before I came into opera, mostly at Reinhardt's, although I worked later, also, for Otto Preminger, at that time Otto Ludwig Preminger, who had been an actor, and, at that time, one of the lovers in the Midsummer Night's Dream production, and later became the director of a theater. And I worked for him in this theater.

Pfaff: Do you remember the name of that theater?

Adler: The theater was called "Die Komödie," which used to be called "Modernes Theater" under other directors, where he still did some shows. For a while, I really had a monopoly on music for drama, for legitimate theater in Vienna, except for the Burgtheater, which had its own orchestra, which was, at the same time, the stage band at the state opera.

I was able to work in two shows in one night, at times, when the timing of the stage music permitted. For instance, I did a show for Max Reinhardt called Periphery, a Czech play, where I had music in the beginning and at the end. And in between, I rushed over to another theater where Reinhardt presented Abie's Irish Rose, which was a most famous play about Jewish and Christian people getting along. That gave me two fees in one night, and I think I made more money in those years than I made later on for a long time to come.

School Friends in Vienna and Viennese Society

Pfaff: Before we go on to our further discussion of the Reinhardt experience, I wanted to ask you about some important colleagues you had in school, not professors, but peers.

Adler: Well, one comes to my mind, that was Alfred Rosé. His father was Arnold. And the son was Alfred Rosé, and we went to the same Gymnasium. And that's how I met his sister, who was the concertmistress of the orchestra, Alma. Alfred Rosé wanted to become a conductor. He studied, naturally, but he took advantage of his relationships and connections, and he assumed assignments, perhaps too soon. He didn't quite make it. He was a member of the staff of the opera; he conducted some ballets, I think, or some simple performances at the opera. But if you make your way through your connections, then you have to really be superior to everybody else, or it doesn't work. And it did not work for him.

I liked "Alfi," as we called him, very much, and we were very often at the Rosé house. There I met also the young Marie Gutheil-Schoder, who went to the same school. Now, Gutheil-Schoder was a famous singer whom Gustav Mahler brought to the opera and who, for years, was the main singer at the Vienna Opera. She also created for the first time the roles of Salome, and, I believe, also of Elektra, I am not sure whether in Vienna or in Dresden. Strauss adored her. Her son was in that school.

Then there was a young conductor--later a conductor, a student then--Kurt Overhoff, whose sister went to the Volksschule with me and was the prettiest girl in school, and therefore a good friend of mine, Irmi Overhof. She was later at the Gymnasium. There was also the son of Arthur Schnitzler, the well-known and most successful writer in Vienna. Who else?

Pfaff: Karajan?

Adler: No; that was elsewhere. In the Gymnasium, I don't recall anybody at this moment. At the Academy was Herbert von Karajan. I think he was with me in the theory classes also; he studied with the other famous theory teacher, Joseph Marx, the composer who became also the director of the Academy at one time. And my friendship with Karajan goes back to the twenties, therefore. He is a few years younger than I, but we were in the same classes at the Academy.

There were also, obviously, other young men--and ladies--who made careers as musicians. I would mention one because she was rather well-known in the late thirties in the United States; that was a harpsichord, organ and piano player, Yella Pessl. I think that she was also a pupil of Wunderer's at the time I got there, although we had never met. She and her sister Margit, a very early girlfriend of mine, were closest friends of Wunderer's. I was sent to Wunderer by other people, and by chance met Yella Pessl at a party. At the Pessl house, I ran into other people of great importance: Richard Strauss, and [Franz] Schmidt, who became my teacher later. There was a painter, Karlinsky, who was famous in Vienna in those days. He sticks especially in my mind because he painted a beautiful portrait of my girlfriend, Margit.

The way it was in Vienna in those days, there was a social society, and there was a cultural society. And the Pessl house was a mixture. It was in a suburb of Vienna, had a beautiful garden, located in the countryside out there. Naturally, I had to take the streetcar and schlepp the flowers I had bought for my girlfriend from the other end of the city, where I lived, on the one-and-a-half hour streetcar trip to Ober St. Veit. We are still in contact. Both girls live on the East Coast, in Massachusetts, now, and still make music like mad.

Wunderer, of course, died. The Pessl parents died. But we are still alive.

More about Ernst and Ida Adler

Pfaff: What about your parents; at what point did they die?

Adler: My father died in 1932. I had already been on an engagement in the opera houses in Germany at that time, and he, on Christmas Day, 1932, had a heart attack, after having been examined three weeks earlier and declared in perfect health. Did I say he was fifty-two years old? He never had been sick with the heart; his only trouble was his ear. There are two Christmas holidays, the 25th and 26th of December, in Catholic countries like Austria, and we couldn't

find a heart specialist. Everybody was out of town; only the old family doctor was available. My father spent a horrible night, which I will never forget; he was in incredible pain, from the 27th to the 28th of December. And on the 28th, we finally had a specialist at the house. In the morning he said, "I don't think he can survive this." He came back in the afternoon around five o'clock, and said, "Well, since he pulled through so well until now, I think we made it." At eight-thirty in the evening he died, in his sleep, a few hours later.

My mother came to the United States in 1938. When I left, she was still in Vienna, but going to France. Leon Blum, the famous socialist Prime Minister of France, had been a close friend of my uncle's. My uncle had been asked by the Czech government, where he lived from 1933 to '38, to leave Czechoslovakia, because the situation with Germany and Czechoslovakia had become very ticklish. So he went to Paris and died there suddenly; he was born in 1873, and died in Paris in the summer of 1938. Leon Blum insisted that my mother come to Paris, which she finally did after I had left. He arranged for her to leave the night before the Germans occupied Paris, for the south of France. She spent quite a few difficult years there, and finally came here via Casablanca, where she was interned in a hospital and came down with cholera, had Arabian male nurses, and had her visa expire. I succeeded in having it renewed because the foreign office in Washington was well-acquainted with my uncle and certainly wanted to open the doors for his sister, after he had died. So she came to this country--I forget the exact year. She lived first in Chicago with me, and then moved to New York, where I had also moved. She died of cancer in 1945. Sixty-three years old at that time.

I was here, but only for a short part of the year. In 1943 it was at the suggestion of my predecessor, Maestro Merola, that I moved from Chicago to New York. So in 1945 I returned from here to New York instead of Chicago; my mother was already there. She died in our apartment after having been operated on, but it was too late, and I think probably the knowledge of how to handle cancer operations wasn't quite advanced enough.

Remembering Max Reinhardt

Pfaff: So, we move back to Max Reinhardt's theater.

Adler: We go back to 1925. Two performances of A Midsummer Night's Dream, and then the production of Shakespeare's King Lear started, for me, three years during which I made music in, made music for, and conducted Reinhardt's productions at the Josefstadt Theater in

Vienna, or worked also for other stage directors. I worked with incredible artists of the highest standards and reputation. To mention a few, there were the four Thimigs, a family. There was Helene, who became Reinhardt's wife later, before he died; then Hermann, Hans, and last but not least, father Hugo. Actually, I conducted the music in a play by Nestroy, in which all of them performed. And Helene Thimig was a drum major in it, and had studied to play the drums in order to perform right.

I remember Dagni Serveas, Madi Christians, Maria Barth, Käthe Gold, Lilli Darvas, who played a lot in New York later on. I did music and noises for Maugham's Rain. There were jungle noises and rain and whatnot; it wasn't the easiest thing to do. I went on a vacation, and her show was continuing, and Maria Barth had a wire sent to me, would I please come back immediately and take over. She was a very interesting artist. Maria Fein, an actress. Max Pallenberg. Hans Rehmann. Gustav von Waldau--a wonderful actor. Eugen Klopfer--he was the one who performed Lear. Alexander Moissi, a man Reinhardt thought very highly of, and I did music for him and Helene Thimig in Des Meeres und der Liebe Wellen, a Grillparzer drama, very important in those days. The Danegger family; there were several: Mathilde Danegger, Theo Danegger--I've forgotten all the first names, but there were three or four of them.

You mentioned critics earlier. I did what little music there was in Bernard Shaw's Fanny's First Play. That's a literal translation; it may have another English title which I don't know, but in German it was Fannys erstes Stück. There was a prologue and an epilogue, in which four critics talk the whole time. Reinhardt had three critics and one actor perform, and while the play took place, they were free from the prologue to the epilogue. I remember there were the most interesting, fascinating discussions and arguments in the dressing rooms. I missed my musical cue once, because I was so taken by the discussion of those men that I arrived on the stage too late and missed my entrance; it was a piece that I had to play on the harmonium. I apologized to father Thimig, saying that something went wrong, and that the harmonium didn't have enough air--sure, because I did not pump it. And he said, "And the light didn't have enough air, either." My harmonium playing was a light cue, and so the light didn't work either; because I didn't start to play, the electrician didn't.

I conducted in a play by Sternheim, in which Marlene Dietrich made her debut as a showgirl. It was a play I remember, and I remember Marlene Dietrich in it.

Pfaff: What was the title of the play?

Adler: Die Schule von Uznach. In 1928--December, 1928--I made the move to Germany. During vacation time, I worked at the Reinhardt theater in Vienna, although Reinhardt himself was not there very often because he was at the Festspiele in Salzburg or whatever. Then in 1933, I believe, was one of the last productions he did in Vienna. It was Goethe's Faust. He tried to duplicate the enormous production of the Salzburg Felsenreitschule on the small stage of the Josefstädter Theater in Vienna, and there was a set designer called Otto Niedermoser, who accomplished this very difficult task in a very excellent way.

That is where one of the main actresses with whom I worked performed; she was Paula Wessely, an incredible actress. She still performs, if I'm not mistaken, as does Adrienne Gessner.

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Adler: Paula Wessely was married to Attila Hoerbiger. And Gessner was the daughter of a famous voice teacher in Vienna by the name of Geiringer. I spent a vacation time with them once, in the Dolomites, along with a sister of Adrienne, Gretel von Bukovich, an actress who performed also at the Reinhardt stage.

Working in Voice Studios

Adler: During my student years and early years making music for drama, I also played accompaniments in vocal studios in Vienna. I did this in order to learn how those voice teachers did it--or didn't do it--more than to earn money, because I was making money then in the theaters.

I played for a man called Zitomirsky, and I think he was some kind of a magician. His idea was, anybody who has a normal speaking voice can also sing, but I didn't see that he succeeded. Or, there was a man called Ernst Tauber, no relative of the famous tenor, Richard Tauber.

That was a very interesting case. He was the teacher for one singer who, from a very small voice, developed into an Wagner soprano in the late thirties in Germany and Austria; Bertl Obholzer was her name. In Dresden, where Clemens Krauss had engaged her for the Second Lady in Magic Flute, they had sent her home with the idea that her voice was too small. She was singing, later on, Isolde, the Brünnhildes, et cetera. It was Ernst Tauber who brought her voice to that caliber, and she was very grateful and recommended him to many colleagues. And he had probably thirty, forty, fifty students. And none of them really made it.

The only one who succeeded--and succeeded well, but I think more as an actor than as a singer--was Ralph Herbert. He was at the Metropolitan; a very well-known Eisenstein in Die Fledermaus and such. Nice guy, and an excellent artist. But that taught me that it is a matter of luck for a singer to find the voice teacher who can develop his voice.

I played in the studio of Felici Kszowska; she was Polish or Russian. Her students were well-known singers like Jarmila Novotna, or the Konetzní sisters.

Pfaff: Anny and Hilde?

Adler: Yes. I worked with Hilde; she studied her first Elsa in Lohengrin with me in Salzburg. Then there was Jarmila, who studied her first recital program for London with me. Kszowska--her conversation was mostly in French--she was a dame of great style, and also taught in great style. One singer who worked with me was Anton Dermota, in the thirties. He studied his first Pinkerton--in Vienna, Linkerton; it's not Pinkerton in Germany, it's Linkerton--with me.

Pfaff: Why is that?

Adler: I don't know; I guess it's a funny name in German, so they changed it to Linkerton. Later he sang also one of the master singers in the Meistersinger I was involved in for Toscanini. Of course, there were the others: Lotte Lehmann worked also with Kszowska; there was Kerstin Thorborg--not with Kszowska--and Charlie Kullman, Schorr, Nilsson, Weidemann, Herbert Alsen. Many of them I met later in the United States, and in our theater here.

In my very early days--and that is more as a boy of twelve years on a vacation--I met the famous tenor Alfred Piccaver, who had one of the most beautiful voices, and he was a great partner, first of Maria Jeritza, and then mainly of Lotte Lehmann.

He was married to the daughter of a Lutheran minister, who was one of the most beautiful women in Vienna. The same summer, she and Iphegenie Buchmann, who was the wife of Mr. Castiglioni, were my companions on that vacation. I played tennis and swam with them, and it was Mr. Castiglioni who, seven or eight years later, became the sponsor of Max Reinhardt.

Miss Buchmann, also a beautiful woman, gave up acting. If I am not mistaken, and you may have to check me on this, I believe she was somehow a secretary or a kind of associate of Reinhardt later on in Hollywood or New York.

Another man whom I met at the Preminger theater, Die Komödie, was an Hungarian: Oskar Beregy, and he sticks so much in my mind because he was the male lead in this Express One Hundred Thirty-Three, the last play I did for Preminger before leaving for opera in Germany. And the female lead was Lotte Mosbacher, who later became a Reinhardt actress.

So, you see, in the years of my development--as a person, and maybe as a musician and artist--I was surrounded, not only by singers, but also by actors. And there cannot be any doubt that this fact affected my entire artistic life.

The Question of Timing in Opera

Adler: We have talked about timing, which is a much-neglected difference between opera and drama, and that naturally became a necessity for my reaction to a production, or to a scene. I believe very much in talking to singers about timing--not only as far as tempi go, but pauses, to get the right feeling for the right length of a pause. The length is up to the singer--but it's not something that singers, or stage directors, or conductors out there, are much concerned about, unless you pinpoint it. I worked, the other day, on the recitative of Tamino in Magic Flute. As the first finale starts, Tamino is brought on the stage by the three Kinder, and they leave with a very legato and expressive postlude. After that, the famous recitative of Tamino starts.

Now, the first words of Tamino are something like, "The wisdom that those boys expressed to me is put in my heart, my mind, forever." Well, you cannot say this immediately after a stirring postlude; you have to respect the pause that Mozart wrote there. But how long the pause should be is, in that case, up to the singer or director or conductor, while other pauses are marked in certain tempos. The greater the artist is, the easier it will be for him to determine how to solve such problems and come to the right solution.

In my early days at the opera, the first performance of Lohengrin that I heard at the Imperial Opera was with Anna Bahr-Mildenburg as Ortrud. She was the wife of the famous Austrian author, Hermann Bahr. I remember her not only as Ortrud, but I heard her later in a lecture where she spent a lot of time talking about rests and general pauses in opera scores. She used the Judgement Scene of Aida (Amneris) to discuss individual pauses, and she rightly said that Verdi, or Wagner, or other great artists and composers and creators would not have requested a pause at times where it was really not necessary and the declamation could have

better continued without an interruption, unless the pause had special significance, and therefore the duty of the interpreter is to think, "Why did the composer write this pause here?" And if it's not in a certain meter, how long should it be? But one cannot simply skip it, and that has been done all too often.

Restoration of the Josefstädter Theater

Adler: Max Reinhardt, when he took over the Josefstädter Theater in the mid-twenties, had it completely restored in the most elegant and most expensive way, sponsored by Mr. Castiglioni. One day there was a famous accident. They had a big chandelier which was raised to the ceiling before each act of the performance started. Naturally, it had to have a safety device, because the prospect of this enormous chandelier falling down was deadly.

When they tested it before the opening of the theater, the device didn't work and the chandelier crashed down into the empty theater and went to pieces. They had to restore it, which delayed the opening of the theater. The opening performance was a Goldoni piece, in which Reinhardt really excelled. Ein Diener sweier Herrn, A Servant of Two Lords, and it was a fabulous performance. But that's where the Metropolitan, the new Metropolitan, got the idea of the moving chandelier from.

II LAUNCHING A CAREER IN OPERA: 1928-1938

[Interview 2: January 17, 1985] ##

Remembering Richard Strauss

Pfaff: You mentioned that you met Richard Strauss. When was that?

Adler: It was the early twenties, I guess. I remember one incident at a party. Dr. Strauss was there, and I was there. It followed a Salome performance with Maria Jeritza in the title role. I asked Strauss if he was pleased with the performance, and he said immediately, "Oh, I know what you think of Jeritza." And I said, "Yes." I asked because she was accurate for hardly one bar in that performance, musically. So I had my doubts that Strauss was satisfied. But he said, "Well, but wasn't she wonderful?" So her beautiful voice, her enormous acting talent, her radiant personality, meant more to Strauss than the accuracy with which she interpreted what he composed.

He was quite an interesting man. There is another Strauss anecdote, although I wasn't present for this one. It was after the First World War, in the twenties, when he conducted a concert in Berlin. It was a symphony concert, which included the Fourth Beethoven Symphony. In the first movement of the symphony, there is a note written in the part of the bassoon, which doesn't exist on the instrument. All the great conductors--Bruno Walter, Leo Blech, Otto Klemperer, and, I think, even Furtwängler--were in Berlin at the same time, and present at that rehearsal, and they were all curious about what Strauss would do with this bassoon passage.

Well, it came, and he didn't stop, but went on. After the rehearsal was over, everybody jumped at Strauss and said, "How come you didn't say anything? What is your opinion about this bassoon passage? There is this note which is not on the instrument." He said, "Yes, I know. What did he play?" [chuckles]

So that is Strauss. I think that those two incidents are characteristic. He was extremely calm. In the opera he'd always sit down when he conducted, which actually was the usual situation in Vienna at that time. Only when, say, he conducted Fidelio, the Third Leonore Overture--in the syncopated passage, which has to be very clear--he raised up from his seat a tiny bit and beat a little bigger. Otherwise his was a very small beat. Very fast tempi--for those days, incredibly fast. I remember his Tristan und Isolde, which was especially fast.

Pfaff: You heard his Tristan?

Adler: Oh yes.

Pfaff: It was notable for being so fast?

Adler: It was a fabulous interpretation. Because he was, naturally, an outstanding musician, and a very strong personality. He said certain things; for instance, that Schalk conducted [Der] Rosenkavalier better than he, Strauss, did. On the other hand, nobody conducted Elektra like Strauss.

Pfaff: Did you hear Strauss conduct Elektra?

Adler: Oh sure, yes.

Pfaff: Tell me anything you can remember about that.

Adler: Well, his beat created lightness in the orchestra. At the same time, a very dramatic impact. So the singers had an easier time. In Elektra it is very difficult not to cover the singers with the orchestra. But he succeeded entirely. And the tempi were so very right. He overwhelmed you.

But I remember [Der] Rosenkavalier under Schalk, which certainly was as memorable.

Pfaff: Was Strauss the conductor of the Salome when you heard Jeritza sing it?

Adler: [Puzzled] He was conducting, yes. So, you mean he could have been in the box. No. He conducted.

He liked to conduct Mozart. Of Wagner, to my recollection, it was Tristan and Dutchman and Lohengrin, both very fast. Furthermore, he conducted Fidelio, as I mentioned; also Hansel und Gretel. I think I told you the other day that Humperdinck, the composer of Hansel und Gretel, composed music for Reinhardt plays

in his early career as a stage director. In Gustl Adler's Don't Forget the Chinese Nightingales this is elaborated on.

Pfaff: What were you going to say about Strauss conducting Hansel und Gretel?

Adler: I think that he liked Hansel und Gretel as so many great musicians do. I remember another opera which is not well known here at all. It is The Barber of Baghdad by Cornelius, which Strauss also loved to conduct. He conducted also his Josephslegende, in Vienna, which he did extremely well. Josephslegende is a pantomime which actually was performed recently in Vienna, with great success.

He composed another ballet, which was called Schlagobers, which I don't think was heard outside of Vienna very much, and wasn't too successful even there.

Pfaff: If you had to guess, how many times do you think you heard Strauss conduct?

Adler: I couldn't guess. Because my experience of him extends over so many years. I heard him in Vienna, in Salzburg, and probably also in Berlin.

He was a shrewd businessman. He knew exactly where his works were being performed, and what royalties to expect. When I was in Kaiserslauten, I met him again, once. He knew exactly that we just had done Salome, and how many performances, and he referred to it. So he was aware what royalties were coming even from a place like Kaiserslauten. Imagine.

A Beginning in Opera: Kaiserslauten, Germany: 1928-1932

Pfaff: So let's move on to Kaiserslauten. When was it that you were engaged there?

Adler: I got there, I remember very clearly, on December 1, 1928. It was the middle of the season. I had an offer to come there as assistant to the new opera director, as chorus director, and as what you call in German, "Mit Dirigierverpflichtung," which means "chorus director who would also conduct." It's a double-sided thing: one, that the director has to give you works to conduct, and, two, that you have to conduct. If it doesn't mention a special amount in the contract, it means that you are engaged to conduct without conducting fees. They are included in the general contract.

And I did conduct. I got there December 1, and for Christmas I conducted for the first time. It was a work--an operetta--called Die Olga von der Wolga, by a Mr. Grün. I don't remember one bar of it. I only remember the title because I think it's very funny. I had never conducted an operetta in my life, and it was not one of the big operettas. It was a small-scale work. In my experience, most of the bigger works have more success than the smaller works. Perhaps it's a dangerous statement, but it is perhaps true of opera in general. In opera also, the bigger ones have more public success than the smaller ones. "Grand opera" is something that people go for more than for the smaller works.

You see this still today. There is a tendency to promote opera composition in the United States. The National Endowment [for the Arts] spends a lot of money in grants for opera composers, but they encourage one-act operas. Yet it is well known that very few one-act operas are entirely successful.

While I was in Kaiserslauten, which was four seasons, I conducted both opera and operetta--more operetta, at that time, than opera. In some ways, opera may be easier to conduct than operetta. In operetta, you have to be very careful not to become cheap in your interpretation, to watch the dancing, to watch the text, and to watch the limitations of your cast. There frequently are artists with much smaller voices, but they still want to sing. There's a certain amount of musical declamation in operetta which you can tolerate, but I remember I once conducted [The] Merry Widow, and the Danilo was really a "bon vivant." He could hardly sing anything. He spoke, sometimes on pitch, sometimes over the music.

Of course, you find this in music theater a lot. Think about Schoenberg, or Lear, by Reimann, which we performed in San Francisco a few years ago. The part of the fool in Lear has no singing at all, yet it is written in the score with some indication of the pitches the composer had in mind. You have to find a very musical actor to perform such roles.

Pfaff: Whom did you find when you did it in '81?

Adler: It was an actor named Lloyd, from New York, who did a very good job. They had another one in Munich, who couldn't be considered, of course, because our performance was in English, and he had done it in German. In Moses und Aron there are also such problems, and in quite a few other music-theater pieces.

Pfaff: Who was the director at Kaiserslauten, and what was your working relationship with him?

Adler: His name was Fritz Cecerle. He came there from Krefeld, another German city, after the beginning of the 1928-29 season. He needed an assistant. He remembered that a lady friend of his had talked about me. This lady friend I met in 1927 in Switzerland, while I was lying in the sun on a raft. She came swimming up to that raft, and so we met. She was a pianist, and she was from the same city that Cecerle came from. She must have talked about me, because I soon got a wire offering me a position in Kaiserslauten.

At that time, I was working for Otto Preminger in a play called Express Thirty-Three, and directing some twelve or sixteen musicians to make train noises. Preminger was very fussy about those train noises, and we tried it with means that didn't work. So I finally wrote a score, and engaged musicians to do it. In a sense, it went very well. I remember I got a Christmas card in Germany from the musicians. It said, "We are still 'running' your train. But what does it mean when the engineer is not here anymore?"

So, Dr. Cecerle came to head the Kaiserslauten theater. But he wasn't particularly interested in running the theater. He was only interested in conducting. Originally, he was a very sick man; he had had morphine poisoning after an infection during the First World War. They gave him morphine as a drug, and he had a hard time getting off it.

Finally, they gave him alcohol and cigarettes. He added women. Well, he started the day by drinking German Kirschwasser at ten in the morning from water glasses, and he smoked eighty cigarettes a day--I don't want to question the number of women.

So he didn't have much time to direct the theater. It was a municipal theater, but supported also by the State of the Rheinpfalz. Since Kaiserslauten was still occupied by the French for ten years after the First World War, there was very much subsidy money available; from the city, from the Rheinpfalz, from Bavaria, and from Berlin. So, it was a well-off theater, and required quite a bit of attention--because, naturally, if you get so many subsidies, you must report every moment, and fulfill the conditions of the subsidies. The main condition was that we had to perform once a week in the surrounding areas in other towns besides Kaiserslauten.

Pfaff: Where is Kaiserslauten in Germany?

Adler: Kaiserslauten is the capital of the Rheinpfalz; it's not far from Mannheim, not far from Ludwigshafen and Wiessbaden. It's in the western part of Germany, near the Saar land, which was so much

under dispute, because it had been German, and then French, throughout history. The French naturally wanted to keep it after the First World War.

The interesting thing about this theater was that unlike most German theaters, which have opera and operetta as well as drama, Kaiserslauten had a separate theater for drama. Our theater was strictly music, opera and operetta. In my recollection, Dr. Cecerle was such a fabulous musician that I recall Carmen performances which were superior to most other Carmens I have heard. He loved Mozart. He led The Barber of Baghdad; he did Mehul's Joseph in Egypt, also Waltershausen operas. There is an opera, Oberst Chabert, which we did. And we did a second one, which escapes me at the moment. But we did also Hindemith, we did Kurt Weill, Ernst Toch. It was a rather progressive and mixed repertoire.

Back to administration. Dr. Cecerle's secretary, a girl twenty-three years old and in her second year in opera, and I, twenty-three years old and in my first year in opera, were running the theater, and had to assume most of the responsibilities towards city and state officials. Actually, after I left, Dr. Cecerle was reported by a high Nazi official in Kaiserslauten as being not dependable politically. And so he could not go to Frankfurt, where he was supposed to succeed William Steinberg, because the Nazi Party objected. Naturally, Cecerle had to leave Kaiserslauten, and never got a job again while the Nazis were in power. From what I understand--and I was not in touch with him during the war--he couldn't get any engagements afterwards, either. He went back to his native Graz, the second largest city in Austria, and became music critic of the communist paper. Now that was during the years after the First World War, when communism was much more popular and widespread in Central Europe than it is now.

A mutual friend, who was in charge of most of the musical events in Graz, offered Cecerle, a few years later, the opportunity to conduct the Second Symphony by Mahler. He was thrilled, but after several months he resigned from his contract and said he felt he wasn't "up to it" anymore. As I understand it, he died not much later. Very sad; he was a great talent, a very attractive, charming man, and an excellent musician.

Another opera I remember is the The Tales of Hoffmann, which we presented in a superlative way. Cecerle even re-orchestrated some parts--I don't know if this would be acceptable nowadays, but it was then--and it was an unforgettable production.

Pfaff: You said that you had to go out into the surrounding area once a week. Did that have practical ramifications?

Adler: It was difficult, especially because, as I said, we were only a musical theater. We didn't perform any drama, you know. There were also recitals when we went out of town, and sometimes a special drama. They played in our theater when we were not there. We toured to towns like Zweibrücken, which had a wonderful, old little theater--to my recollection, it was a rococo theater. We played in Pirmasens, where they made beer and shoes. We never went there without getting a pair of new shoes, as a gift, and drank a lot of beer. And we performed in Ludwigshafen, near Mannheim. It is a very important industrial city in Germany. We alternated with the opera from Karlsruhe, where Krips was conductor at that time. Josef Krips was later here in San Francisco with the symphony. I remember once conducting in Ludwigshafen, and there was a supper after the performance. The host said to me, "You know, last week Josef Krips conducted here. He eats much more than you."

Then we performed in Neustadt, in the heart of the wine country, playing in what was, for Germany, an enormous hall. Once I conducted an operetta, Im weissen Rössl, there, and moved--one hour before the performance--from a smaller theater to a big hall because there was so much interest. In Kaiserslauten, I would say that the enthusiasm for opera and operetta was about the same.

I should mention that in those days the opera orchestras would also play the symphony concerts in cities which were not too rich or too big. That meant that there were many more opera [orchestra] performances than symphony concerts. When I came to the United States, I found that, throughout the land, it was the other way around. There was always more symphony than opera.

Pfaff: And was it also true that most of the symphonies in the states functioned as the opera orchestras as well.

Adler: Yes, not the entire symphony, but frequently part of it. However, the administrations were mostly separate, which actually was also the case in Germany. In Kaiserslauten, for instance, the symphony concerts did not take place in the opera house. There was a separate hall, a bigger hall, which made sense, because there were only a few symphony concerts during the year. If you consider that the Vienna Philharmonic, at that time, played only eight pairs of regular concerts a season, plus one pair of pension fund concerts or, as they were called, Nicolai concerts--that meant there were only eighteen regular concerts. Everything else was a casual engagement.

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Pfaff: Tell me what your responsibilities were at Kaiserslauten--the whole range of them.

Adler: Well, administratively, I was involved with everything. Dr. Cecerle would discuss casting and engagements with me. I was really his only assistant in this respect. Also, [I took care of] budget matters, since he did not care to do this, together with an official of the city of Kaiserslauten, who was actually in our management. I remember he had a funny name, Stumpf. We handled the entire finances. Unions existed but were not too strong in those days. But dealing with the orchestra was not simple. The orchestras were quite powerful. I remember that, in the city of Kaiserslauten, we had a municipal theater orchestra. The city, one year, granted lifetime contracts, which naturally was desirable from both sides. But then the city got in financial difficulties, and, two years later, dismissed the orchestra, cancelling the lifetime contracts.

The orchestra went to court--and lost the lawsuit; except for the fourth horn. The fourth horn had a separate suit, and won it. The judge reasoned that this fourth horn player had had two offers. One from the city of Kaiserslauten--with a lifetime contract--and one, for three years, as fourth horn player with the Berlin Philharmonic. He took Kaiserslauten over Berlin because of the lifelong contract. So when the lawyer of the city asked the judge, "What can we do with one horn player?" The judge said, "Oh, you can do anything. Let him go up on the tower of City Hall and play every hour on the hour!" [Interruption as phone rings]

Naturally, the orchestra was very ill-humored after that. I remember the evening after the orchestra lost its suit against the city, I had to conduct the dress rehearsal of an operetta, Viktoria und ihr Husar, by Abraham. Abraham was, in those days, a very successful operetta composer. Most performed were Viktoria und ihr Husar; Die Blume von Hawaii, and Hotel Savoy. (I have, incidentally, conducted all three.) The dress rehearsal of Viktoria und ihr Husar was a very difficult evening, with the orchestra sulking and giving expression to their bad feeling. Well, the situation was saved by a guest tenor, who had come as a replacement at the last minute. He did not know the Pfalz wine. By the evening, he was so high that he couldn't even find the door on the stage where he was to make his exit. The orchestra, of course, laughed. I made a remark, and he went to the footlights and said, "What does this man want from me?!" and such things. That saved the evening.

I must say that after this incident he was given escorts, night and day, until the performance. He was completely sober the

next evening when we opened, and sang splendidly. The orchestra was, by that time in a better mood and everything went very well.

It might be interesting to talk a moment about what operettas were performed. There were the usual European operettas by Franz Léhar, Leo Fall, Emmerich Kalman. There were smaller musical comedies by Walter Kollo, the father of René Kollo, the famous tenor. And there was the Die Keusche Susanna; Adieu, Mimi; Die Hofloge (The Royal Box), and whatnot. There were very old operettas, like Die Foersterkristel, and De Vogelhändler. Such operettas were really very charming and naive, and, in the late twenties and early thirties, very successful. They were on the repertory all over.

Composers like Abraham wrote more up-to-date music. I cannot say that it was modern music, but it was another style. The dance forms were different, the songs were different, but of course, you know how Lehar changed his style, and composed--more or less, finally--as if it were a kind of an opera. And the State Opera in Vienna performed operettas by Lehar. They also did operettas of Johann Strauss, like The Gypsy Baron, and Die Fledermaus, which were standard--or an operetta I like very much, The Night in Venice. And Offenbach, if you call Orpheus or Beautiful Helene an operetta, or comic opera, or whatever, but they were on the repertoire at all times.

The interesting thing is that a smaller theater didn't have a big enough ensemble to be able to separate opera and operetta entirely. The artists, when they were ambitious--and most of them were--liked the exchange. Opera artists love to perform in operetta, and operetta artists were proud if they were asked to perform in opera--provided they had enough voice. Which is something that should be noted in the present development in our country, where you talk so much about music theater and musical theater. The question arises, is it good to make those transitions from opera to operetta, and operetta to opera? It certainly was customary when I grew up in Europe.

Pfaff: It is an unusual thing now. You're saying it was a much more usual thing at that time?

Adler: Absolutely. I think that what we have now in musicals, and perhaps even in operetta, at that time may have caused problems for the orchestra. The so-called classical operettas the orchestra could play very well. But they didn't have all the instruments that you need now for a musical. And, of course, they did not have the instruments, either, that you need for a contemporary opera.

But the distinction between opera and operetta did not exist to the current degree until a few years ago. Everything then was performed in German. The choice of language is a lasting problem, which will never be resolved, because ideally one should perform everything in the original language. It is very interesting, as I have found, that artists do not have great problems singing in foreign languages--if you give them enough time. To my great amazement, when we started to produce operas by Janacek in San Francisco--in Czech--there was no problem with the language. Of course, we had our own Czech coaches. And it should be noted that the chorus in San Francisco learned Jenufa in Czech faster than it learned Boris [Godunov] in English. Also, when we did the opera Katerina Ismailova by Shostakovich, first in English and then in Russian, the latter went extremely well.

Naturally, you have to develop the right audiences for this, too. Translations and texts, in opera, have always been a shaky affair. I don't know how many translations of Carmen in German exist. I recall that Felix von Weingartner's wife, Carmen Studer, had translated Carmen. Well, it did not catch on at all, and they went back to the previous translation, which I think was less good. But the ears in Vienna at that time were used to it. I was exposed to a revision of the original German text of Fidelio in Kaiserslauten. We had a Fidelio production, for which the famous musicologist and critic, Richard Specht, rewrote the dialogue of Fidelio. It simply didn't work. Nobody wanted it, and then when we needed a guest singer, we were in real trouble.

I conducted such a Fidelio performance when we had a guest from Frankfurt singing Pizarro. He came a couple of days before the performance. He was an older man, who simply couldn't remember the revised dialogue. Before his aria in the first act, I noticed things were going badly. I made a signal to the tympani player, who naturally knew the word cue, because I thought something would happen. Well, sure enough. Suddenly, Pizarro said, "Nur eine kühne Tat Kann ich mich retten." "Brrrrrrr," tympani: the player was ready. "Nur eine kühne Tat" means: "Only an audacious act can save me now." And so it was--he skipped everything, just saying this old line.

As for Carmen, which was given with recitatives, we all knew that the translations were not good. And now it sounds terribly funny, you know. All of Verdi, all of Puccini--all these were performed in German--which is not the case anymore. There are artistic reasons, as I mentioned, but there are also practical reasons, which I implied. In Germany, and in Europe in general, where you have so many cancellations, and where distances are so small, you have replacements on the day of the performance more often than not. If someone comes and doesn't know the original

language, imagine, each city would use another translation. It's just impossible.

But in the "old days," the artists didn't make so many guest appearances. They were in an ensemble, and stayed there. It would be impossible now. The artists wouldn't be satisfied. It is too easy to travel, to communicate with other theaters, to be heard by more people, to sell more recordings. So I do not think ensemble theater could be revived.

Pfaff: About when did you see the change taking place?

Adler: Oh, after the Second World War. Herbert von Karajan had an idea, which didn't work out either. He wanted to put ensembles together--let's say double or triple cast, all superlative--for one opera. And then he wanted to take this production from one major opera house to the other. Not take the orchestra, possibly not the chorus, but the singers and the scenery. But the singers did not want to sing the same roles so often, and did not want to be under one contract for so long.

You know, nowadays, singers can get by with a very small repertoire. Jan Peerce, for instance--who, of course, was not necessarily only an opera singer--he had a repertoire of only eight or nine roles, and did very well with them.

Pfaff: When you were at Kaiserslauten, how much of your work there was conducting?

Adler: I was responsible for the chorus, remember, also. It was a very small chorus; I don't remember the numbers, but it was small. At the same time, I think I knew how to handle those people, and how to make them sound. Because the chorus was quite good, and they were very enthusiastic and dedicated people, I worked very well with them. There were no limitations of union hours. I worked also with all the soloists, who liked to coach with me. I conducted, automatically, I would say, an average of twice a week throughout the year. I don't quite remember how often we gave the same works. It depended on whether we took them out of town or not.

You must understand, here, in the States, we make comparisons, and we ask, "How much of your work was this? How much of your work was that?" Abroad, we never did. We just did our work, and we didn't think, "Last May did I conduct more often, or did I work more hours in the administration, or how many chorus rehearsals did I really have?" It didn't matter. We had to do our job. If it was good, then we were satisfied.

Often, when I worked with someone and I questioned the results of our work, they said, "Sir, I am doing my best." I said, "Well, do better than your best, because it's not good enough." I had an unfortunate urge to do always better--for others and for myself.

Pfaff: Was one of your administrative duties there fund-raising, or was that all handled by the State?

Adler: No. The fund-raising--well, it wasn't fund-raising, it was subsidy-raising--was done by the financial man of the city. First of all, naturally, in the city, but he was also the one who was in touch with the Ministries of the States, of the Pfalz, of Bavaria, in Berlin and the federal government and so on. No, I did not do that.

After Kaiserslauten: 1932-1936

Pfaff: For what reason, and when, did you leave Kaiserslauten?

Adler: I had offers to go to other theaters. I believe that I fairly quickly gained some reputation. One theater was Ulm. That story I think you have heard already--it was when I was offered the job of--as it was called in German--Coordinierter erster Kapellmeister. That means something like "associate first conductor." I asked the Intendant, the director of the theater in Ulm, what this really meant. And he said, "Well, frankly, I had already one first conductor, but I think he's becoming too big for his britches, and I need a little more equilibrium there." I said, "If you talk this way, I have to ask you, 'Who is this man?'" And the director said, "It is Herbert von Karajan." And I said, "Oh. Thank you very much for your offer, but regretfully I must decline. First, Herbert von Karajan is a very good friend of mine, whom I know from the Music Academy in Vienna, and second, he's much too good." So Karajan and I remained friends; and still are friends. [laughing]

Pfaff: And you said there was another offer besides Ulm?

Adler: I was supposed to go to Augsburg in 1932. That was at a time when Germany already was threatened by the Nazi movement. As an Austrian citizen, I needed a permit to work, which expired in the summer of '32. I was told that I couldn't get it extended. So I went back to Vienna, and then I started conducting in Italy. Mainly operettas, strangely enough.

Pfaff: When did you go to Italy?

Adler: 'Thirty-three. I think it was '33, '34--

Pfaff: To more than one place, in Italy?

Adler: Yes. We performed, I specifically remember, in Bolzano--which used to be Bozen under the Austrian regime--and in Merano--Meran, where my mother grew up. There we did Abraham, for instance. I remember conducting there the Ball im Savoy.

I came back and joined the Volksoper, which was being reorganized in Vienna. The Volksoper is a smaller opera house, which at that time was, more or less, municipal, vs. the Staatsoper which was supported by what would be here the federal government.

There were two directors at the Volksoper. One was a gentleman called Lustig-Prean, and the other one, Jean Ernest. He was a Rumanian baritone. And they reorganized the Volksoper, which was not in very good shape. When I came back from Italy, I was sent there. They said, "Well, we don't think we have a job for you anymore. We are about to open our season." And I said, "Oh, I'm very sorry."

But then they called me again, and said they had one opening for a coach--not one of the top coaches, but a coach, an assistant, with a miserable salary. In comparison to what I had earned in Germany and Italy, it was ridiculous. And the position was also bad. I was thinking, is it better to sit at home and wait for an opportunity, or take this inferior job?

I decided to take it. The first day I was working, the chorus director--and there was a large chorus--asked me if I could take the rehearsal for him. I said, "Sure." I remember clearly, it was Fidelio. Well, I rehearsed, and in the last half hour, the chorus director came and listened. The same afternoon, I was called to the director, and he said, to me, "The chorus director"--his name was Fritz Weidlich--"has requested you as his assistant. We had assigned someone else, but he prefers you. Would you take the job?" I thought, well, this is the first day, and it's already a position, after all. I said, "What is involved?" They said, "Well, of course your salary would be higher." They doubled the fee--which is pretty good for one day, even if it was an inferior fee to start with. But I took the job, and a few months later, I started conducting. I was there two seasons: '34-'35, and '35-'36. I conducted more and more.

Pfaff: You don't mean just conducting the chorus, you mean conducting whole operas.

Adler: Yes, yes. The performances. I conducted, incidentally, an operetta by Lehar--Eva--which is musically very beautiful, but I don't remember the libretto. The tenor was Jon Hesters. And I read yesterday, in an Austrian theatrical publication, that Hesters was celebrating his fiftieth anniversary at the Volksoper. An extremely good-looking chap, lacking technique, but fairly good vocal material. I can see him clearly, and I remember also the name of the soprano was Betty Werner, who was an operetta prima donna at the Volksoper.

But then I did the famous Faust performance by Gounod, in the '35-'36 season. The soprano was Italian, Tatiana Menotti, the tenor was Greek, Vasso Argyris, the bass was Polish--I forget his name--and the rest of the cast was German. And the languages were Margarethe in Italian, Faust in French, the Polish Mefisto in Russian, and the rest in German, including the chorus--except for Martha Schwertlein, who knew her part in French, German, and Italian, and switched languages according to whom she addressed, in the garden scene. But the performance was very successful. The same night they gave Faust (or Margarethe, as it was called in Germany) at the Staatsoper, and at the Volksoper. And the press was so much more favorable to the quatri-lingual performance in the Volksoper, that the Staatsoper director, who knew me, called me in the next day and asked, "What are you doing next summer?" And I said, "Oh, I have some obligations, and I am busy." He said, "You don't have time?" I said, "Well, it depends. What did you have in mind?" He said, "I wanted to ask you if you wanted to assist Toscanini with his first Meistersinger at the Salzburg Festival." And I said, "Dr. Kerber, you have no idea how much time I have."

Assisting Toscanini in Salzburg: 1936

Adler: So I went to Salzburg to assist Toscanini. The four assistants were [Erich] Leinsdorf, [Georg] Solti, [Laszlo] Halasz, who founded New York City Opera in New York, and Adler. Those were an unforgettable two months: Lotte Lehmann was Eva; Kerstin Thorborg, Magdalena; Charlie Kullman, Stolzing--his first Stolzing; Herbert Alsen, Pogner; and it was supposed to be Friedrich Schorr as Sachs, but Toscanini and Schorr had a falling out because he came late for rehearsal, and so Hans-Hermann Nissen, from Munich, sang Sachs. A man called Salava was David, and I'm not sure who was Beckmesser. But the two months were really unforgettable. I still have the score, which I marked with Toscanini's remarks, interpretations and so on.

Even if you didn't always agree with him, his knowledge of music, text, action, and language, was incredible. The aging

man--he was already ahead in years in 1936--but he would show the apprentices how to make the "jumps" Wagner requests from them. He was tireless in rehearsal.

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Adler: I enjoyed learning from Toscanini. It is one of the main chapters of my life. There are many musical matters which I learned from him. One was glad to learn about his thoughts, even if one did not agree.

Pfaff: How did you and the other three assistants work with him?

Adler: Each one did something different. Leinsdorf, for instance, played most of the rehearsals. I think Solti played some rehearsals also. I played fewer rehearsals, but I was in charge of controlling the artists, both musically and in their activities on the stage. Herbert Graf was the producer. Furthermore I was in charge of some of the stage bands.

There's an amusing story. In one of the performances, in the last scene, one of the stage drums came in at the wrong time. I was heartbroken, and waited for Toscanini to come from the pit, to apologize. He came up, and he was raving about how wonderful the performance was, and so on. I said to him, "Maestro, I am terribly sorry it happened. There's no excuse...." He said, "What?" He had not noticed it. Which is possible in the turmoil of the last scene, you know. He did not notice that one of the snare drums came in wrong. But I was ready to jump off a bridge. [laughs]

Pfaff: Did you do other things that summer besides Meistersinger? Was it just Meistersinger?

Adler: I was engaged for Meistersinger only. But I went also to other rehearsals in Salzburg.

The Music of Gustav Mahler

Adler: In my early days, I was exposed to Gustav Mahler's music. My parents, who knew Mahler very well, had me go to my first concert of Mahler--it was his Second Symphony--when I was fifteen years old, without telling me what it was all about. I was overwhelmed. For years I went to other Mahler--to all Mahler--performances in Vienna. And then Mahler somehow "lost me" in the later twenties. I was very unhappy about this. When I was in Salzburg in '36, Bruno Walter prepared the Third Mahler Symphony. I went to all the

rehearsals, because I wanted to find my way back. But I didn't. It just did not convince me.

I feel now that possibly the Third Mahler is not the right work to bring a musician back whom Mahler had lost, or who had lost Mahler. And so it didn't work. Yet, in Chicago in 1938-39, I was coaching a singer who was specializing in German lieder, and we started working on Mahler, among all of the other composers, and that brought me back. After having worked with her for a couple of years, I found my way back, also, to the orchestral music. And I am very happy about this.

I may have been influenced negatively by my theory teacher at the Academy in the twenties, who had no good word to say about Mahler. I am sure that this man, whom I respected greatly, was able to influence me. He would say that Mahler's music was not original, that he could prove that every bar was stolen and whatnot. It is possible that I sensed that he had a point, insofar as Mahler was such a strong interpreter that he himself probably was influenced by the music he conducted all winter. As we know, he composed mostly during his vacations in the summer, during the couple of months he took off. And it is possible that there were strong influences, but so what? The expression of Mahler is so great, that even if his music is not original, it has a place in our repertoire--which, as we all know, in recent years has become bigger and bigger.

But I must say, as much as I regret it, that I would have objected to my teacher, who later was loyal to Hitler, having such ethics that he would influence his students. Bad-mouthing a man like Mahler, under whom he had played the cello in the opera. But so it was.

Pfaff: You said that your parents knew Mahler?

Adler: Not personally, but they went to the opera regularly during the years he conducted and was director of the opera. And I remember the day he died, they went to his funeral. He lived not far from us, and they went to his funeral. I was a little boy then.

Pfaff: Yes, you would have been just six. He died in 1911.

Adler: I remember also--I think it was in 1914--when the first Parsifal was performed in Vienna. My parents, who were subscribers, went to the opera. It was like Bayreuth in the early afternoon. I saw my father gleaming in tails and my mother in evening clothes--in the early afternoon, which was completely irregular. It impressed me, as a little boy, very much--not knowing what it was all about. And then a performance, which could last so long, you know.

Pfaff: So how long was your stay at the Volksoper? You didn't go to the Staatsoper, then, you just went to Salzburg, via the Staatsoper director.

Adler: Only to Salzburg. No, I could have gone to the Staatsoper earlier, through all the connections I had, but I wanted to make my career on my own. And I wanted to be more ready to go to the Staatsoper. I don't think I would have been ready then for the Staatsoper. It is my strong belief that one should go through the mill, and that only those who go through the mill have the real knowledge of opera. There's so much that you don't learn in the classroom, or at the desk, that you have to learn in practice. So I declined. I went only to learn there; to rehearsals, as I discussed. And I attended performances. I learned how to do it, and how not to do it.

At one time, Clemens Krauss, in his early years of directorship, was interested in my doing some administrative work for the opera, which I didn't do either. Maybe some casual things once in a while. Perhaps this is the moment to mention that not only in Kaiserslauten was I thrown into administration, but I was thrown into administration at the Volksoper; I was thrown into administration very soon when I came to the United States at the Chicago Opera; and the same here, at the San Francisco Opera. But you are not in administration when you make guest appearances. On the contrary, the people are a little afraid of you if you know too much about administration.

I remember negotiating a chorus-union contract for the Chicago Opera in my third year in Chicago--when I was very green about the States. But they let me do it, because they had confidence I would do a good job.

So I was in Salzburg in the summer of '36 at the festival. I worked at the Mozarteum, coaching in the opera department, during the summer of 1937. There was a morning when I was sitting in the library (the library was on an upper floor) and an official of the Mozarteum--which is the famous music school in Salzburg, where incidentally, Dr. Paumgartner, whom we mentioned in connection with Max Reinhardt, was the director--an official came and said, "Mr. Adler, do you speak English?" And I said, "Some." He said, "Well, we have a crazy American here, and she has fired every coach. We would like you to try it with her."

I said, "What for? She will fire me, too." But he said, "No, we would appreciate it, because she's very important to us. Would you please try?" I said, "All right, make an appointment." He said, "No, no, she is downstairs. You have to come now."

Well, I went downstairs, and there was a very tall lady from Chicago. She looked down, I looked up, we went in a rehearsal room. I remember on the piano was a score, the "Ballatella from I Pagliacci. We started. After a couple of bars I interrupted her; a few bars further I interrupted her; a few bars further I interrupted her; a few bars further--with corrections all the time. Then suddenly she interrupted me and said, "I see we are going to get along fine."

And so it was. We became very good friends. Her brother was there also, and many people from Chicago--American friends, including Larry Tibbett--and they all wanted me to come to Chicago right after Salzburg, after the summer of '37. But I had many engagements for the '37-'38 season in Europe and didn't want to break all my contracts. So I thanked them and said, "I can't."

From Salzburg to Chicago: 1938

Adler: But then I went to Reichenberg. Reichenberg was the capital of Sudeten Germany. I was engaged there for two seasons: '36-'37 and '37-'38. We are talking now about fall/winter '37. I got a letter from this singer, from Berlin via London--because there was mail censorship between Berlin and Czechoslovakia, but Berlin-London-Czechoslovakia had no censorship. And she wrote me and said, "It looks very much like war in Berlin. Wouldn't you like to come to the States now?"

I wrote back, "I still hope I can make it by next fall." So I got an undated visa through the singer's family friend, Cordell Hull. Cordell Hull was the Secretary of State of President Roosevelt, and I was permitted to come whenever I wanted to come, regardless of quota.

I had a contract, actually, in the fall of '37 for the Chicago Opera, which I didn't really cancel. They postponed it until I went in the fall of '38. I spent a couple of days in New York, and then went directly to Chicago. I was a little late for my contract.

The first thing they asked me to do was to prompt Meistersinger, with many of my friends from Salzburg. I said, "Well, I have just conducted Meistersinger in Reichenberg, but I have never prompted an opera." Yet I agreed to do it, because they assigned it to me. I was a terrible prompter. As a prompter, you must always be ahead of the beat; as a conductor, if you are too

far ahead of the beat, there would be disaster. So I went through, and worked privately with all those European singers whom I knew, and started also conducting in Chicago fairly soon. I remember I did Martha, a new version of Flotow's Martha, with Helen Jepson, and James Melton in the leading roles.

Pfaff: Was Helen Jepson the woman you'd coached in Europe?

Adler: Oh, no. That was Janet Fairbank. Helen Jepson was a very beautiful American singer--who sang much too much in her early days, and therefore didn't last too long. I remember conducting a performance of La Traviata with her. In the intermission, I said, "Helen! You are so expressive tonight. What's the matter?"

And she said, "Don't you know I have to compete?"

What had happened, Jarmila Novotna, one of the singers I coached in Salzburg in 1937, had sung Traviata in the previous Chicago performance, and she had had an incredible success. Like many Slavic people, Novotna was very, very beautiful. She had dark hair, while Jepson was blonde. And so Jepson was stimulated to the hilt that night.

I stayed with the Chicago Opera through the 1942 season: '38, '39, '40, '41, '42. In the five seasons I worked with four different general managers. That certainly was not very helpful for the situation at the opera house. I organized the first all-American chorus in 1940. After auditioning seven hundred-plus young singers--with most beautiful voices, beautiful young people--we finally ended up with seventy-five, and added seventeen experienced choristers. So there was a total of ninety-two in the chorus.

It was really a joy. They did very, very well. Of the seven hundred and fifty we had auditioned, we kept another hundred and twenty-five in the extra chorus. The Aida was done for the opening with more than two hundred incredible voices, for the Chicago season opening in 1940. Eddie Johnson, the general manager of the Metropolitan, was in the audience. He wanted me to come to the Met with the chorus immediately. (We were playing earlier, naturally, than the Met.)

I said, "Mr. Johnson, we are flattered, but I assure you it cannot be done. This is a new, young chorus, and we just don't know enough operas for you."

Anyhow, I stayed in Chicago through the 1942 season. Gaetano Merola, my predecessor as general director of the San Francisco Opera, had heard about me and offered me a job in San Francisco.

I had conducted opera performances in smaller places near New York, in Trenton, New Jersey, and Waterbury. And in some town near Boston--very close to Boston. And there were Metropolitan singers. I remember conducting a Trovatore performance with Martinelli as Manrico, and Ella Flesch as Leonora. She was very successful everywhere. She was a Hungarian singer whom I knew from Vienna.

I conducted an Aida with Bob Merrill as Amonasro the night before he won his Metropolitan auditions. I remember that after the performance, he took a sleeper to New York, and the next night he won his Metropolitan auditions. I'm sure he knew already, before, that he would win, and he did. And I conducted a Lucia with Hilde Reggiani and Bruno Landi, who were very famous in Italian opera. Landi was a very short tenor with a lovely voice. He reminded me a little of Tito Schippa, who was in my first season in Chicago.

I gradually got into the American operatic life [and learned how] it had to be handled, administratively, socially, musically. I remember in 1940, in Chicago, both Fritz Reiner and Rodzinski were conducting--Reiner Rosenkavalier, and Rodzinski Salome. They demanded extra rehearsals with the orchestra. In Europe that was more natural; you didn't have to force the issue.

I am not sure now in which order it was, but I think it was Rodzinski who had extra rehearsals for Salome; and then Reiner demanded that he, also, have more rehearsals. They were competing, you see. I got along well with Reiner; we became good friends. And Rodzinski.

I remember Marjorie Lawrence, who was still well at that time, sang Salome. I was in the well, with the Jochanaan [chuckles], George Chablitzki, a Polish baritone. There was no television. So I was conducting Chablitzki when Marjorie Lawrence threw her last veil to me down there.

I conducted also many Grant Park concerts.

Working in Reichenberg, Czechoslovakia: 1936-1938

Adler: Maybe we should get back to Reichenberg for a moment, and I'll tell you why. During the two seasons I was there--'36-'37, '37-'38--Reichenberg was under a director, Paul Barnay. Paul Barnay was from a family of theater directors; this was in Germany. He was Jewish. He was chased by dogs and Nazi police across the

German-Czech border. When he came to Reichenberg, they kept him there. Now, Reichenberg was an interesting city. The population was almost entirely German, although there were Czech officials.

The president of Czechoslovakia was Benesch, and, as it developed during those two years, Reichenberg had the last democratic German theater. For that reason, we got money from the personal funds of Benesch, who thought very highly of Barnay. It was also a border theater, the German border being only half an hour from Reichenberg. There was a German opera house in Prague, but the conditions were already very political--much more so than in Reichenberg. They developed this way. It was noticeable that the population supported opera in Reichenberg, but not operetta and certainly not drama, because Barnay was a drama stage director and producer, and they--as German people in Czechoslovakia--were Nazis already.

It is true that the standards were very high; the musical director was someone from the Schoenberg-Zemlinsky circle: Dr. Heinrich Jalowetz, an excellent musician and a terribly serious man. He was not the best conductor technically, but there were very interesting and good performances under his direction. And we had very good stage directors. We had a large amount of rehearsal, since there was considerable money available.

Pfaff: Who did you say the money was from? The private funds of whom?

Adler: The president of Czechoslovakia was Mr. Benesch, a very democratic man and a great statesman. It was also supported by private funds. But it became a political problem. Naturally, the Czech officials--the police force in Reichenberg was completely Czech--didn't like the Nazi attitude of the population.

I conducted a performance of Meistersinger once and found Czech police in my dressing room when I arrived there at intermission. They were asking me why the chorus made Nazi demonstrations. And I said, "What?"

They said, "Well, they sang 'Heil' all the time," of course without the Hitler," but "Heil."

I said, "I'm very sorry, but Wagner composed it this way. That was not a Nazi demonstration."

So they said, "But why did they use a Hitler salute?"

So I said, "Well, I'm sorry, I did not see this. You better ask the stage director about it." But they couldn't reach him.

It is likely that they did because the chorus was Nazi--which did not mean that we didn't get along very well. They knew exactly where I stood--and perhaps it would have remained this way. I was asked to stay in Reichenberg also for the '38-'39 season, when the orchestra and the mayor--the new Nazi mayor--invited me specifically. I declined because I said I was supposed to go to Chicago in 1937, and did not go, but now I would go. That was on September 5, 1938. On September 9, I took a Dutch boat to Hoboken, New Jersey. On the Nineteenth, Hitler overran Sudeten Germany, and there was no opera season. So I was quite lucky.

But the city of Reichenberg, in the spring of '38, at the end of the season, gave the personnel of the theater the use of the theater for a ridiculous, nominal rent. We ran it on a collective basis. There was a group of, I think, six others and I, who ran this season. We sold out every performance--because the disliked director wasn't there.

Pfaff: Barnay.

Adler: Barnay.

And then, during that period, the operetta picked up also, and drama directed by others than Barnay.

Pfaff: So you performed operetta and drama during the time you were working in the rented theater in a collective season?

Adler: And opera. At that time the distribution was about even. Opera had been successful all the time, but they were boycotting the drama, and also, partly, operetta. And some of the population just would not come at all. But then they came for the sake of the personnel. We were able, within this collective enterprise, to pay the full contract fees, which was remarkable.

Pfaff: That was one summer?

Adler: One month. One month at the end of the season, post-season.

Pfaff: At the end of the '38 season, just before you left?

Adler: But then, as I said, they asked me to stay. I probably was the only non-Nazi on this board that ran the theater. Yet it was possible to get along: I got along in Kaiserslauten, during the years when Nazis became stronger and stronger. I had many friends who were Nazis. But, at that time, you know, it was also different. It didn't look as bad as it would become.

I think that in Germany, one is not enough aware of the problem that the Catholic Chancellor, Bruening, caused, because Germany didn't have many Catholics, and the Lutherans--the majority of the population--objected to the "Black Chancellor in Berlin." Black meaning the color of a priest's cassock. That's why they called it the "Black Priest in Berlin," you know, the "Black Chancellor," Bruening. And Hitler, and the Nazis--the people were not allowed to have an army at that time, and they loved to be soldiers--let them "play soldiers." So those Sunday excursions that the Nazis made, with the white stockings and the brown shirts, became very popular. It was a game. Well, gradually, the Nazi party gained followers. I clearly remember the elections between Hindenburg and Hitler, when Hindenburg won. I was sitting in a private room of the theater restaurant, together with many Nazis. As the vote came in on the radio, they would call:

"Five hundred votes for Hitler!" I said: "Eight hundred votes for Hindenburg!"--and so on. It was possible in those days. That was '32. But later, naturally, it became impossible and unbearable.

Pfaff: What were the reasons that it was clear to you that the Nazi party wasn't for you?

Adler: Well, one, I had some Jewish blood from my mother's side. And, two, the way the philosophy--if you dare to call it that--of the Nazis developed was impossible. And last, but perhaps not least, I really didn't want to join the army, which I would have had to do. I didn't have enough Jewish blood that they wouldn't have drafted me.

In Reichenberg, for instance, there was a German Consul General. I had an Austrian passport with a domicile in Czechoslovakia, so I was a German citizen--because Austrians were German citizens with a foreign domicile. The German Consul and I were on very friendly terms. There was no sense of all that was coming later in '38. It got awfully bad in late '38.

Pfaff: What do you mean? What got bad?

Adler: Well, the excessive persecutions--political and religious--grew worse and worse. And the war, and all that other abominable stuff. When I was in Germany, until '33, the feeling was that the population was "playing soldiers." And Hitler gave them the opportunity. The Nazis didn't like the Catholics--in spite of the fact that Catholic Munich was one of the first major cities to support Hitler. And Hitler was an Austrian--that has to be considered, too. So, you know, all those things--they are not rational.

Neither in Germany nor in Czechoslovakia did I have any problem. I was fortunate not to get involved, because I could have been on a blacklist. My uncle certainly was on that blacklist, being the leader of the Social Democratic Party in Austria from 1918 to 1933. Afterwards, he had been in Czechoslovakia, but had to go at the request of the Czech government in early summer of '38. He moved to Paris. He couldn't travel through Germany; I think he flew, if I'm not mistaken, or he went via Switzerland to Paris. But he had been on the blacklist, also, of Russia. I was supposed to conduct radio concerts in Leningrad and Moscow in my very early years. I was warned--I cannot say how--not to go, because I was on the blacklist on account of my uncle, even though I was absolutely not political.

On account of her brother, my mother was oriented towards the Social Democrats. My father was a capitalist. But all this worked, you know, in spite of the development of fascism in the late twenties, in Austria especially, and then also in Germany, with the Nazis. In Austria it was another form of fascism, more similar to Mussolini's.

There were battles. There were cannons. In 1933, the Austrian government made the unfortunate decision to shoot at the Social Democratic houses across the Danube with cannons. Houses were destroyed; thousands were arrested without reasons; people were killed on the streets and in their homes.

But then again, after 1934, in spite of the fact that an Austrian chancellor was murdered by fascists, they stormed and burned the Palace of Justice. One lived somehow with more ease, those days.

Pfaff: How much of your time were you giving to giving radio broadcasts? I didn't know about that part of your career.

Adler: I conducted some radio broadcasts in Czechoslovakia. I remember coming from Vienna, driving with the composer Eric Zeisl, who was a friend of mine, and who was an extremely gifted composer. The most sloppy composer there ever was. His downfall was his sloppiness. But I did the world premiere of one of his works at Radio Brno, which was the second largest radio station: Prague and Brno. And I drove up with him by car from Vienna in about an hour and a half.

I didn't give too much time to radio conducting. I was, more or less, a regular conductor for a while in Vienna. That must have been '25-'26. Hermann Scherchen, who had founded the Vienna Concert Orchestra--a very young orchestra--left, so I finished the season for him, and conducted concerts there. But my main activity really was opera.

Pfaff: When, and under what circumstances, did you meet your first wife?

Getting Married in Kaiserslauten: 1932

Adler: My first wife I met in Kaiserslauten, in the last season. That was '31-'32, when she was engaged as a mezzo-soprano. She was an excellent actress, with a faulty vocal technique, fabulously good-looking and very successful. She got letters all the time asking her for dates, which was very special in those days. And I remember one letter where it said this fellow wanted to meet her there and there, then and then, with or without Mr. Adler! Our relationship was no secret in the city. It wasn't a large city, and I was quite well known.

Then we got married. She came to Vienna after we both left Kaiserslauten. She was from Leipzig, in Germany. We were married in 1932. She performed, also, in various special music theater groups in Vienna, and a talent scout for Warner Brothers saw her and wanted her to come to Hollywood. She learned English, and when the time came that a decision had to be made, I opposed her going to Hollywood.

Well, when I decided to go to Chicago, she opposed leaving Europe, and so she didn't go with me. But we met again after the war, and now my present wife, and she and her husband, and I, we're all very good friends. She visited us here, and we visited her in Hamburg, where she lives.

Pfaff: How was the marriage resolved, since you didn't want to go to America at different times?

Adler: I was here already, and she had the marriage annulled by a German judge, who ruled that we didn't know what we were doing when we got married. I think it was even said that we were not old enough, which is not quite true. But anyhow, it was not a divorce, it was an annulment. I could practically say I've been married only twice, and not three times.

Pfaff: And what was her name?

Adler: Gertrud--called Trudl, Moellnitz. That's not her name anymore, now, because she's married a second time. She could say the same thing as I, because she is now married for the third time.

Pfaff: And when were you two married?

Adler: 1932. After we came back from Kaiserslauten in November '32. She also worked at the Volksoper later on, but mainly she sang in specialized music-theater productions. There was a small company which gave a--can one say "parody?"--on Richard Strauss. She sang Pauline Strauss, his wife. Alban Berg happened to drop in on one of those performances, and fell for Trudl Moellnitz. He came again and again, because he enjoyed her so much. The music for this Strauss parody was composed by Henry Holt, who had at that time the name Heinz Horwitz, of Vienna, who lived and died later on in Palo Alto.

Pfaff: I thought the name was very familiar.

Adler: Well, the other Henry Holt is a relative of his, who was with the Seattle Opera for many years, and is now the head of Los Angeles Opera Theater.

III A NEW LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES: 1938

[Interview 3: January 24, 1985] ##

More About Kaiserslauten

Pfaff: Was there more you wished to say about your Kaiserslauten experience?

Adler: Dr. Cecerle, the director of the opera, engaged a conductor. His name was Herbert Albert, who actually later became quite well known outside of Germany. But at that time, in the early thirties, he had the advantage that he was a conductor for Bad Tölz, a vacation spot in Bavaria, where they needed an orchestra--as did many locations in Europe at that time. There were concerts at eleven-thirty or noon for an hour, and then again in the afternoon, at five-thirty or six for an hour, and sometimes in the evening. The orchestra of the opera in Kaiserslauten was engaged to play those concerts in Tölz, through the person of Herbert Albert, who took them along.

He was a very strong-minded gentleman, who conducted mainly opera, but also operetta, in Kaiserslauten. It was an arrangement that other middle-size, German opera houses were looking for, too, because one didn't know what to do with the orchestras, and the musicians naturally pressed more and more for full-year contracts.

Pfaff: Did you hear the summer concerts?

Adler: No. When I was in Kaiserslauten, I left when the season was over, and I went home to Vienna. You may recall that for several years, I worked and directed in Max Reinhardt's theater in Vienna during a part of the opera vacation time.

In general, in Europe one is--or at least I was--very much used to vacations, and I regularly took vacations after the seasons in Kaiserslauten. I went to the mountains, or wherever, and rested and had a good time.

Pfaff: Where were some of the places that you vacationed?

Adler: After the first season in Kaiserslauten--that would be the summer of '29--I went to the Salzkammergut. That is in the surroundings of Salzburg, at the lakes. Alone. Later on, I went to Hofgastein, which is one of the spas, with my parents, for a short time. And then on to Salzburg to the festival, with a girlfriend.

In the summer of '30, I went to Denmark. A friend of mine borrowed the car of his mother. We first drove up to Salzburg and on to Munich. There we picked up some girlfriends and went up in the mountains near Munich. When we ran out of money, we didn't know what to do, so we drove without the girls--in one day, which was a great distance at that time--from Munich to Jutland. My friend had been there as a child, after the First World War. There was a family which adopted him. He and I spent five weeks there with a very nice Danish family. Jutland is a fascinating place. You go up to Skagen, and you walk with one foot in the North Sea and the other foot in the East Sea. And they were, to me, very interesting people up there, because for them World War I consisted of the sea battle at Kattegat and Skatarag. They had heard the shooting noises, but that was all. The mentality of the young people with whom we mixed, and of the older people, was very much affected by not having been involved in the War. There certainly was never a real shortage of food. The entire mood was very peaceful, not a resentful mood. It was an interesting five weeks.

The next summer, to my recollection, I spent in Bohemia--rather, it was already Czechoslovakia--at the "gentleman's farm" of the parents of a young singer with whom I was coaching. She wanted to prepare her roles, so she asked me to come to this place in Czechoslovakia, and we worked on the scores for her first engagement in Germany the following fall. Otherwise I had a restful summer.

Pfaff: That was an entire summer?

Adler: That was, I think, for five or six weeks. Not an entire summer. But this normal vacation period in Europe--or at least in the house of my parents--was from four to six weeks.

Pfaff: Do you remember the young singer's name?

Adler: No. I see her in front of me--I especially see her sister, who was much prettier, and with whom I had a little flirtation going on. Until we took a walk in the woods and sat down on a rock. Suddenly I noticed that we were surrounded by poisonous snakes, which had a

nest under the rock. Well, we didn't budge, did not move for a while. I have been afraid of snakes since then, although nothing happened except that I lost this girlfriend. That was the end of our romance. [chuckles]

Pfaff: It's not a romantic situation.

Adler: It surely was not. And I have never sat down on a rock in the woods since.

Second Marriage, and Starting a Family in America

Pfaff: Well, while we're on the subject of romance, one of the things we didn't talk about in the Chicago years was your second marriage.

Adler: Oh, we are jumping quite a few years. I think we mentioned the first marriage, which was the singer in Kaiserslauten. She came to Vienna after the season. My mother thought it would be a really wonderful match, so we got married, without thinking very much, and it was not the best idea, I think now. The two of us didn't complement each other too well, although we are still on very friendly terms. I think that she's a lovely person, and she thinks I'm a lovely person. We got married in '32 and separated in '38.

And then, when I came to the United States--Chicago, to be precise--I married a girl there in 1940. We were married for twenty-three years, from '40 to '63, and my two grown-up children are from this marriage [to Diantha Warfel].

Pfaff: And their names again?

Adler: The older girl is Kristin Diantha--Diantha being the name of her mother. And the boy's name is Ronald Huntington--Huntington being an ancestor of my second wife, a man who signed the Declaration of Independence. I am very proud of that, and we wanted to include his name in our family. Diantha, my second wife, died two years ago.

Pfaff: Here in this country?

Adler: In San Francisco. She was Chicago-born. It was actually not Joliet, I don't know for sure if she was not born in nearby Plainsfield. Plainsfield was near Joliet, and that's where her parents lived. Her father had been a delightful man. He was a teacher of printing. Both parents of my wife came from printers' families. My wife's mother, actually, was from Indianapolis; my

wife's father--I'm not sure where from. But he was, when I met him, still teaching printing in Joliet. He was an extremely well-educated, sophisticated gentleman, whom we called "The Tree." He was really very, very special.

He died a few years ago in Santa Barbara. Both parents were then in an old-age home in Santa Barbara. He swam every day. He jumped in the pool and had a heart attack, which caused his death immediately. He drowned. The mother died in the same house last year. They both were well advanced in years.

Pfaff: How did you meet Diantha?

Adler: Diantha and I met in a very strange way. For a while, I conducted an amateur orchestra in this very wealthy suburb of Chicago. The Chicago Musician's Union didn't like my working with amateurs. At one rehearsal, there was a young girl present who was a friend of the girl who managed the orchestra. She was a student, no less.

When the union forced me to give up conducting this orchestra, not so long thereafter, Diantha wrote me a note, saying that she was glad to hear that I had to give up the rehearsals, because I was the only one who took them seriously. The members of the orchestra wanted, really, not only to play their instruments, but to play around, and my efforts were too sincere for that. The letter was so fascinating that I called her. But she had never time, and I had never time, so our dates were very scarce. Frequently I had to drive to rehearsals with a chorus, which I directed outside of Chicago; so she rode with me to the rehearsals.

And then, in the summer--it was 1940--while I was training the new Chicago Opera Chorus (which was a daily rehearsal time of seven hours), I decided to take off a few weeks in July. I wanted to go to the mountains. Actually, I had asked Diantha earlier if we shouldn't get married, but she had said no. When I asked her to go with me to the mountains, she said, "Well, I'm sorry, my parents would never agree that I go with you without being married." So we got married quickly and went to Estes Park, and Grand Lake, and other places in the Rockies--on a honeymoon.

At the same time, I was working with Janet Fairbank, who had brought me to the United States. She had already given up opera. I had convinced her that she was not the type for an opera singer--neither vocally nor physically. But she was an extremely musical, intelligent young lady, very hard-working. So we decided she should give recitals in Carnegie Recital Hall, in New York--all first performances, beginning with music by international composers and then only American composers. I recall looking through what

were probably thousands of manuscripts of songs by American composers with her. To her recitals came not only many young singers who were interested in how she managed this repertory, but also press and publishers and many important people in New York's musical life. So it was a very fruitful effort.

It came to my mind that at the end of the honeymoon, I had committed myself to join this singer in Lake Geneva, near Chicago, where her parents had a big country place, and we looked through manuscripts for a week. That was a part of our honeymoon. After that, we had to go back to Chicago to continue the preparation of the opera chorus.

Pfaff: Did you actually accompany her, too, or just coach her?

Adler: No, the recitals were in New York. I couldn't really get away then. I probably played some small recitals for her in the Middle West, but not the New York recitals.

Pfaff: To return to your honeymoon, I'm fascinated that you went that far, at that time, for your vacation. What was your feeling for the American countryside and mountains, compared to Europe?

Adler: Well, look, I was used to mountains. Being in the Middle West, I naturally missed the mountains. There were the lakes, and there are beautiful parts in Wisconsin, and so on, but I missed mountains. So I took the first opportunity to go to them. I was rather courageous, because I had not driven much. Hardly anything in Europe. Then when I came here, some friends of mine taught me how to drive, and in 1940 I bought a car. The first trip I took was to the Rocky Mountains. It's very long.

I remember another thing: I got mountain-sick, driving up Pike's Peak. And even more so the next day, on Mount Evans. The road to Mount Evans was awful; it was really careless on my part, because it was a most dangerous road. In between, we were in Central City. We were staying at the Teller House, near the opera house, a little opera house where, later on, I conducted a couple of performances of The Merry Widow to please my friend Bob Darling, who was the general manager. It was with Mary Costa, with whom I was very friendly. On the honeymoon, we saw The Bartered Bride--and my bride suddenly voiced the desire to wear flowers in her hair.

Well, what do you do to find flowers in Central City in the evening? I asked the hotel people, and they said, "Oh, you probably know the soprano. She got so many flowers she will certainly send you some." Sure enough, a few minutes later, big white lilies came up to our room, sent by Josephine Antoine--whom I

hardly knew at that time, but we became good friends later on in Chicago. She coached there with me. I remember one tour de force when she had to learn Oscar, the page in The Masked Ball, in a couple of days. She practically lived at our house, which was near the lake front. We worked for a couple of hours, then she went for a walk on the beach, and then we continued. We repeated the pattern several times each day. This went on for almost a week, until she knew her role.

Josephine sent Diantha white lilies, enormous lilies, and I'll never forget [chuckles] how Diantha arranged those flowers in her hair. We went to Bartered Bride, which was conducted by Frank St. Ledger, the well-known musical secretary of the Metropolitan. It was directed by Felix Brentano, whose parents I had known in Vienna. They ran a music school, and I had conducted an opera performance for them one year, which included scenes from Hansel and Gretel. I have many friends who remember this performance, because my first wife Trudl sang Hansel in that performance--and very well.

With Chicago Opera: 1938-1943

Adler: So that was 1940. We have talked about the opening of Aida, I think, when Eddie Johnson, the general manager of the Metropolitan liked the chorus so much. The general manager of the Chicago Opera in 1940-41 was Henry Weber. He was also musical director of WGN, the radio station, where I had heard a version of Lohengrin my first night in Chicago, with three soloists, and sixteen in the chorus, and eighteen in the orchestra. I had thought, "My God, where did I come?"

He became general manager of that opera season and did extremely well. It was a high-class operation, and Weber lost, this way, much more money than the managers before him had lost in Chicago. The standards were not very high in those days. They had been much higher earlier in Chicago. But then money was scarce. Henry was very particular about rehearsals and productions and casting, and so on. Nineteen-forty was a good season. But the people who gave the dollars for him to lose found that Weber had lost too much. After one year, they called Fortune Gallo in.

Now Gallo was the general manager of the San Carlos Opera Company, a traveling company which was really working on half a shoestring. There's a famous story about when the conductor wanted three stage trumpets as called for in Tannhäuser. Gallo said, "No, there will be two trumpets. Only if the box office is good enough,

we get a third." Those were the standards. Once Gallo came on the stage when we were rehearsing Rigoletto. It was an orchestra rehearsal. He looked down in the pit and saw that the harp was covered. So he asked me,

"Where's the harpist?"

And I said, "There is no harp in Rigoletto."

He said, "Well, but I pay the harpist, don't I?"

I said, "Sure."

He said, "All right. Tell the conductor to write a harp part in the score."

Such things. Mr. Gallo was really a character; it was incredible how he got things done. I shudder when I remember how we walked tight-ropes all the time. And he lost, in the long run, as much money as Henry Weber had lost in a really good season.

So Gallo was around from '41 through '42. And that was when Merola heard about me. Gallo borrowed the Daughter of the Regiment production from San Francisco for Lily Pons. It came with the conductor, Maestro Votto, and the chorus master, Mr. Spadoni. Spadoni attended rehearsals of the chorus I had prepared--and called Merola to say that he had nothing to do in Chicago. So, in early June 1943, Merola invited me to come to San Francisco. I thought I ought to get the approval of the opera board in Chicago, because I wasn't one who walked in and out of a company. I asked the board if I should take the job at the San Francisco Opera, and they said, "Better take it. We don't know if we will have a season." And they did not have seasons, I don't think, in either '43 or '44. And then they had seasons again for two years, I believe with Fausto Clewa, and then they again had no season. Only after Carol Fox and her friends started the Chicago Lyric Opera, they consolidated the situation, and standards became better and better in Chicago. And Ardis Krainik, who succeeded Carol Fox, is doing an extremely good job. Carol Fox was a very bright, talented lady, who wanted to become a singer at first. She coached with me in my early years in Chicago. At that time there was no thought of her becoming an opera manager. That was much later.

Pfaff: What was she coaching with you?

Adler: She was a soprano; if I remember right, it was not a pretty voice. However, she probably worked hard, because she was such an intense woman. She got what she wanted, as a rule.

My memories of Chicago are pleasant. Obviously, the city is enormous, and in many ways ugly except for the lake front and the surroundings. And I made many friends at that time, and those were my first years in the United States. I had met, on the boat coming over, Florence White, a social worker who died in the meantime. This lady really "introduced" me to the United States. I drove her car, and she had property in Southern Illinois. We went to institutions where, as a social worker she had to go. She was an incredibly strong yet mild lady to whom children--who wouldn't talk to anyone else--took very much. I learned a great deal about Americans and the United States from her. But she and her roommate, whom I met in Chicago, were the first ones to show me the real United States.

The circles in which I moved in Chicago were rather high-level financial circles. The conductor of the Chicago Symphony, Frederic Stock, was a great friend of mine. So was Claire Dux-Swift, the German soprano who on a concert tour met Charlie Swift, the Chicago meatpacker. He married her and she gave up singing, except for a few recitals and oratorios.

I had an interesting experience with Frederic Stock. He wanted me to start a group of young opera and oratorio singers in connection with the Chicago Symphony, and located--with the help of Claire Dux-Swift--in the Art Institute of Chicago at the Goodman Theater. This project I was working on when Stock died, and unfortunately, nothing came of it. I think it was an excellent idea. The Chicago Symphony maintained the Civic Orchestra, an orchestra which developed young players. And Stock felt that they should also work with singers, on both opera and oratorio. That's why he wanted me to create this group. I was about to get started when it collapsed, I regret to say. I don't know if I would have left Chicago if this group really would have become reality.

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Pfaff: So there was never actually a group brought together?

Adler: The group was never brought together. We were close to auditions--it got that far.

Pfaff: When you said that you needed to be shown the "real America," what was your feeling about America when you came here? Was it a difficult adjustment?

Adler: It was. I don't know if it was difficult, frankly, but it needed adjustment. I had traveled a lot in Europe, but I had never been away from Europe. I remember when I landed in Hoboken on that boat, the old Statendam, of the Holland-American line. The first

thing--it was Sunday when I disembarked--I saw two people with bowler hats fighting each other and falling into the ditch near the road, and such things. Or, when I came to a breakfast place, and I asked for sugar, they said:

"Well, it's on the counter." I had never seen sugar standing on the counter, you know. Everything, every little thing, was different.

Then I took the train, after three days, from New York to Chicago. We got into a--

Pfaff: Hurricane?

Adler: Hurricane. I couldn't afford a sleeper. There were two sections of the train: one was the Twentieth Century, which was an all-sleeper train. Within ten minutes was another train, the Commodore, which had coaches only. But in the Hudson Valley the two trains were traveling next to each other in the same direction, because everything was flooded, the trees were falling down. We were supposed to return to New York.

Somehow, we managed to go ahead. It took us more than eight hours to reach Albany, so we arrived in Chicago very late. In Chicago, there was beautiful weather. Someone met me at the train station and took me right away to the lake front, and my first impression was an overwhelming one. Because in New York I had not seen nearly so much wide space or beauty during the three days I was there.

And then came the adjusting to Chicago. As I mentioned, the first weekend I was invited to Lake Geneva, to the house of my friend the singer, who was in Vienna at that time. Her parents invited me. I met very important people, and they all talked to me at once, having had very strong cocktails. I could speak English, but I couldn't understand the Midwestern accent.

I learned more about the States in 1939. It was February '39, to be exact. I slipped on the ice in Chicago--they never clean the streets--and I fell and had two double fractures on my right leg. They were not quite sure that I would be able to walk again. It was before penicillin, and before the orthopedic knowledge we have today. My doctor--he was a German physician in whose house I lived--did not want to put a pin through my heel, and so he tried to treat me only with a cast, and the healing process was very, very slow!

But he was right: after two and a half months in the hospital, I was well enough to go home--still with a smaller cast.

As I had no money anymore, I went to his home. I was exiled from there pretty soon, because of my flirting with one of the blond interns at the hospital. I had to move to one of those horrible near-Northside hotels in Chicago, where I spent a year before I got married. Or more than a year.

But I learned a great deal in the hospital, not being alone in the room and other patients changing all the time. And I really learned a lot about the States, being sick--or rather, disabled--so long. One problem was that they gave me too much morphine in the beginning, and then they suddenly took it away from me. I was in pain of the worst kind after that.

But, I became a fixture, too, going around in a wheelchair most of the day. I spent a lot of time in front of the nursery windows. I enjoyed watching those little creatures through the glass.

When I returned home, I wanted to work again right away. I remember coaching with a cast on, which was not easy, because I had to keep my right leg in a certain position. Then, of course, when I moved, I moved to that hotel; I could afford only a small apartment. The piano was in there, but coaching--no. I still had a studio, which I maintained in connection with a voice teacher's studio. All the people were extremely nice and loyal. They came to the hospital; they gave me parties while I was there, and also afterwards. It was really a great experience, how kind my new American friends were. I found one fellow who was studying singing at that time (but later on went to study all kinds of other things, including stage direction, costumes, and so forth in Vienna, and then sang for a while in the Met chorus), and I brought him to San Francisco a couple of years after I had taken over the opera, and he stayed with the company until he became the resident stage director. He's still working with them; just did Hansel and Gretel with them.

Pfaff: Is this Matthew Farruggio?

Adler: That's right, Farruggio.

Pfaff: How did you meet him in Chicago?

Adler: He was a voice student of the voice teacher Richard De Young, called "R.D.," with whom I shared studio space, and was somehow was kind of associated. R.D. had been the voice teacher of Janet Fairbank, the singer who had brought me to the States.

Pfaff: She's the one at whose home you spent that first weekend?

Adler: Her parents' home, at Lake Geneva. I stayed also at their city house, a real patrician home of an old Chicago family. Mr. Fairbank was a corporation lawyer. I was in the hospital, with my broken leg, when he died. They didn't know how to get hold of Janet, the singer, in Vienna. So they called the hospital, and a strange night nurse came to my bed, asking me for the telephone number of Janet Fairbank's voice teacher in Vienna. I, being under the influence of morphine, and not understanding the whole thing, got terribly upset. I didn't know the number. I knew only the name of the voice teacher, but I didn't know the number.

The next morning, I learned that Janet's father had died, which threw me badly, because I was very, very fond of him. He was a beautiful human being; very intelligent, a gentleman in every respect. I had had many, many conversations with him, during the few months I had the privilege of knowing him, that I will never forget.

Pfaff: So, during your years in Chicago, when were your children born?

Adler: Oh, the children. We got married in 1940, and Kristin Diantha was born in July 1942. And Ronald Huntington was born in December 1943.

When I came to San Francisco the first time, Kristin was already with us--and my wife was pregnant the second time.

Maestro Merola's Invitation to San Francisco: 1943

Pfaff: When Merola asked you, and you asked the Chicago Opera board for permission, you actually went to San Francisco?

Adler: Maestro Merola first offered me a contract which was even more ridiculous than the one I accepted. In addition, he wanted me to come from Chicago to San Francisco within a week or so. And I wired him that I was interested, but I couldn't accept the contract this way. So he called me the next night and we talked for an hour without knowing each other personally. During that hour I stupidly accepted his financial offer, which was absolutely insane. He didn't even pay my transportation. And I was to be paid all of one hundred dollars a week, which, even in 1943, was absolutely nothing. But I didn't know any better.

I told Merola that I had to ask the board, as I mentioned before. This done, I accepted, and came to San Francisco two weeks later. The first rehearsal with the chorus--I'll never forget

it--was Rigoletto. First of all, the men went in and out of the rehearsal without any discipline. Second, they didn't pay any attention to precision; they didn't know what a quarter-note was, what an eighth-note was, why I wanted a long upbeat, a short upbeat. All they knew was--well, many of them knew Italian better than I. There was an Italian grocer; there was an Italian banker; there was an Italian vegetable man. Many of those simple North Beach people were there. Terribly nice people.

I'll never forget when, during the earlier rehearsal period, Toscanini conducted Rigoletto on the NBC network. On the night after the broadcast, the vegetable man said to me: "Oh, Maestro, now I know and understand better what you are talking about when you say, 'Quarter-' or 'eighth-note!' or 'Don't hold those notes so long!'"

It was a real amateur chorus, with some very good voices in it. However, I had told Maestro Merola, after the first rehearsal:

"Maestro, I really don't think I should stay here. The standards are so far below Chicago's. I don't know if this is my place."

And he said to me [imitating a heavy Italian accent], "Ha-de-ler, you don't-a want to leave me, after such a short time. Do whatever you want with this chorus of yours." He let me do what I wanted, and so I stayed.

The chorus, over a period of several years, became indeed an outstanding chorus. We enlarged it. The people who didn't belong there actually resigned. They wanted to sing for their pleasure only, but they didn't want to work hard, and they could not be precise or disciplined. It was not what they had in mind. But gradually, it became a really professional chorus.

And it became the only thing that the San Francisco Opera, at that time, owned exclusively. The chorus rehearsed many months, and then sang the seasons here and in Los Angeles. But they did not sing for any other organization. The orchestra players were strictly professional musicians. Some played opera only, yet, after the opera season, with other orchestras. Many of them--perhaps at that time most of them--were also symphony players. Naturally, the singers were all seasonal, and only the chorus worked the major part of the year for the San Francisco Opera.

It was a union chorus all right. At that time the union rules were much looser than they became later on. When you are so long with an organization--I was there thirty-nine years--you learn

about the unions, and the unions learn about you. There was a relationship of mutual trust, even friendship, between union leaders and myself; we managed to get along. Sure, we had our battles and our critical situations, but in general it worked smoothly.

Pfaff: By the time you came to San Francisco, had you already settled that union dispute in Chicago?

Adler: Oh, yes, of course. Otherwise the contract situation would have been more serious. It wasn't a dispute, really; there were negotiations. Any negotiations include disputes, but it was not a major controversy.

Pfaff: So, when you came to San Francisco, you brought your family with you then?

Adler: First I came alone, for a short time. But then I brought my family. I remember renting a flat on Clement Street, between 15th and 16th Avenues. I had no car in San Francisco, so I hitchhiked to the opera house. In those days, you could do such things. I don't think you could risk this now anymore.

In 1944, the next year, I got enough gasoline stamps to drive my car from Chicago to San Francisco, and so I brought the family along.

Pfaff: Were you here a whole season by yourself?

Adler: No, no, no. A week or so, two weeks, the first time. We were in this flat on Clement Street. But I had that flat only during the season. Then, when I came in '44, they couldn't find accommodations in San Francisco. Someone who had kindly looked for a place to live for us had rented a place in Oakland.

In Oakland, together in a flat with defense workers. We shared the kitchen; we shared the bathroom; all we had to ourselves was one room and a sleeping porch. There was no refrigerator--and we had two small children!

After a short time my wife said, "I'm sorry, it really won't work. We have to go back."

I said, "Okay, I will drive to the city, and I will find a house." So I did. We lived during the second season on Greenwich Street, in a fairly decent house. The first night I thought that burglars were in the yard; however, they were rats, who were after the garbage cans.

Then we were two years on Pacific Avenue, in a big, old house which had countless steps from the street to the front door. That wasn't the simplest thing for poor Diantha with the two kids, and groceries, you know. I had a little more time during those days, because I did mainly the chorus. So I started coaching at home.

After '46, until '49, we would have to find every year another house or apartment. I remember we lived once on Garfield Avenue, out in the Ingleside area. There it was so foggy that when the children went to nursery school, my wife lamented: "You see the kids disappear in the fog around here."

Then we lived one year on Parnassus, near UC hospital, and then in '49 we rented a house on Lake Street. It was pretty good; I even thought of buying it, but at that time prices were soaring, and I felt it was much too much. That was the winter of '49-'50, when Merola convinced me we should stay in San Francisco and not go to New York anymore, where I had been going since '45. We found a furnished house in Jordan Park on Palm Avenue, and there we were from 1949 until 1963, until Diantha and I separated. My kids went from childhood to teenage on Palm Avenue.

Pfaff: Please explain to me about these trips that you made to New York. Did you say that they were at Merola's instigation? He encouraged you?

Adler: Yes. He said to me--it must have been in '44 or '45--that he didn't see any reason for anybody to live in Chicago. I still had my apartment in Chicago then.

He said, "That is a place to go from one depot to another, to continue the trip West." At that time, when you took a plane, it stopped in Chicago, and sometimes you even had to change planes there.

I gave up my apartment in Chicago and moved to New York with my family in the fall of 1945. It was practically impossible to find an apartment. Finally, I found the one we discussed the other day, on 54th Street and 7th Avenue--and I spent the winter months in Chicago, because Merola would employ me only from, let us say, March or April through November. Thanksgiving was the end of my contract in Los Angeles. I usually took a vacation in California after that, but that was it. And then I went to New York.

In 1949 Maestro said to me he didn't see any reason for me to spend the winters in New York. Why didn't I live here? And I thought the moving was also bad for the children, on account of schools, so we stayed here the winter of '49-'50 for the first time. I took on the University of California Orchestra in

Berkeley. Joaquin Nin-Culmel arrived late, and they asked me to take the UC Orchestra, with the title of Lecturer at the University of California, for that year. I enjoyed it very much, except it was a difficult year because it was the year of the loyalty oath on the campus. Professor Albert Elkus, who was really one of the leaders of the fight against a loyalty oath, was then the head of the music department, in his last year.

Taking Part in San Francisco's Musical Life

Adler: I was also working at the Conservatory at that time. I led the orchestra at the Conservatory, and I was even given a title by two old ladies, Miss Clement and Miss Hodgehead, who had founded the school and were friends of Professor Elkus. I was, I think, "musical advisor" of the Conservatory, or something like that. I remember getting pretty good orchestra players during the war, because soldier musicians who were stationed at the Presidio came to the Conservatory to rehearse with the orchestra under me. We also gave concerts in what is called the Herbst Theater now. Roy Bogas, for instance, played the Fourth Beethoven Piano Concerto with me there. And we read a lot of music in the rehearsals. I made that orchestra work hard, and they enjoyed it and did fairly well.

Pfaff: Roy Bogas must have been very young at the time.

Adler: Very young. I also conducted concerts with other San Francisco solo instrumentalists while I was in charge of the Young People's Concerts for the San Francisco Symphony. I had replaced Monteux once, at his request, in a concert in Sacramento. It was a broadcast, and the soloist was Claudio Arrau. I remember clearly that he played the Weber Konzertstück; we also played the Second Beethoven Symphony, with the very difficult second movement in which the horn is so prominent. The french horn player, Mr. Sabbatini, was so enthused with my directing with a minimum of rehearsal that he wanted to make a recording of the intermezzo of Mendelssohn's Midsummer Night's Dream with me.

So I got the Young People's Concerts. Alexander Fried was the commentator because they didn't trust me as narrator, because they thought the children wouldn't understand my accent. So Alexander Fried and I prepared the programs, and he talked and I conducted. Except for one concert at Mission High, for which I was also the commentator. It went extremely well, and those students, who were not of the highest moral standards, enjoyed the concert enormously and some--not just to miss another class--asked if they could come

for the second concert. We gave two one-hour concerts in one morning.

On the program was the Stravinsky "Circus Polka"; we played the Haffner Symphony by Mozart and a suite by Bloch, which was written in San Francisco and had a Chinese movement. Ernest Bloch was a friend of Miss Hodgehead and Miss Clement and Mr. Elkus at the Conservatory, so my nose was put on Bloch's music immediately. In the concert we also played "Petite Suite" by Debussy. It wasn't an easy program, but the kids loved it.

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Adler: I should mention how at that time my belief was confirmed that it matters how you introduce people to good music. You can make good music popular if you present it right. I remember I suggested to Herta Glaz, the mezzo-soprano, to sing "Der Schmied" by Brahms in a recital. She had some doubts but she did it right, and it was as much of a success as if she had sung "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," which was very popular then.

I was fascinated when I read a report for the National Council on the Arts about fifteen contemporary operas which were performed in the last two seasons in American companies. Interestingly enough, I had done seven of them before I retired. I believe that one has a responsibility to introduce contemporary works.

More on Chicago Experiences

Pfaff: This is an excellent place to take up the story we didn't get on tape, about your experience conducting the Illinois Symphony when you were in Chicago.

Adler: I was conducting the Illinois Symphony, a WPA orchestra which was under Izler Solomon. The horrible fact was that the players were under the same regulations as WPA workers, and had to be in the rehearsal place for eight hours every day. Naturally, you cannot rehearse an orchestra for eight hours, and I didn't. I rehearsed two or three hours, then I gave them a few hours off, then rehearsed again, and so forth.

In my concert I programmed the Fourth Bruckner Symphony. I talked to my friend Bruno Walter about it, mentioning that I wanted to make some cuts. He was furious and said, "No, you cannot make cuts. Either perform the whole thing, or not at all."

I responded, "Wouldn't it be better to make cuts, and make them carefully, and have a success and make the people like this Bruckner Symphony, than to have them sit there and not be up to the many repetitions and to the long movements?" He said, "No." But I answered, "Excuse me," and I went my own way. The night we had the concert with the Fourth Bruckner, President Roosevelt announced one of his "Fireside Chats." The Illinois Symphony, being entirely government subsidized, had to broadcast the Roosevelt speeches, even on nights of concerts. They made me rearrange the whole program. Between eight and nine o'clock was the Fourth Bruckner; then there was intermission, and then the rest of the program. I came into the hall in shock, to see enormous loudspeakers on the stage for the Roosevelt broadcast.

We started a few minutes late, so at nine o'clock, when the "Fireside Chat" was to be broadcast, we were just at the intermission, and the applause for the Fourth Bruckner. And that night, Bruckner won over Roosevelt, because the audience applauded--and I believe it was certainly an audience of Democrats; it was a government-supported concert--the audience applauded Bruckner for about five minutes of the Roosevelt speech.

I won't say that I want to call this an excuse, but I found it a valid argument to cut Bruckner, and to make it a pleasure for the audience and for the press to listen to. I remember reading in the Chicago Tribune write-up, "If this is Bruckner, why don't we hear more of it?"

But you know, all this was new, naturally, because it was a problem to play Bruckner in the U.S. This was unknown to me, because in Austria and Germany, naturally, you would play Bruckner all the time. However, I am reminded of when Mahler couldn't be played. Under the Nazis, playing Mahler was forbidden. Afterwards, it took a while to reintroduce Mahler--until he became over-popular. I think that Mahler nowadays is perhaps played too much. But it's the same thing; something catches on, and there it is.

The entire musical life in Chicago was new to me. Besides the opera, I conducted free Grant Park concerts. James Petrillo, the President of the Musician's Union, saw to it that there was money to occupy the musicians during the summer. I remember two concerts especially. For one, with Giovanni Martinelli as soloist, we had about 175,000 people in the audience. The second one featured Grace Moore as soloist, and we had about 300,000 people at that concert. That figure was surpassed only by the opera concert I conducted in Manila a few years ago on Christmas Day, at which there were a million people. At least that's what Mrs. Marcos, the wife of the president, told me. There were several parks, all

connected by a loudspeaker system, where Marcos, who was still quite popular then, made his political speeches. We were hooked up to all of those speakers, and Christmas Day afternoon is when all of Manila goes to the parks. We performed La Forza del Destino in concert form that day.

Eva Marton, who is so famous now, was Leonora. As an encore, I conducted the "Hallelujah Chorus." I wasn't nervous when I was told there were a million people in the parks, and that we were on television throughout the Philippines and on all the radio stations. Mrs. Marcos came ten minutes late, and we had to wait for her to start the concert. All that didn't bother me so much. When she suddenly asked me to follow her in a short speech, after she had spoken over the speaker after the concert, I was scared, thinking there were so many people. It was ridiculous, because most of them did not speak English anyhow. But I made myself understood, and I announced the encore "Hallelujah Chorus." When I started to conduct it, all of a sudden fireworks went up--and they were the most fascinating fireworks. I don't think I will ever conduct "Hallelujah Chorus" again accompanied by fireworks. That was to celebrate Christmas 1979.

To go back to Chicago, we see that even simpler people were attracted by those stars or superstars like Martinelli and Grace Moore. And I don't think that it has ever been different, and it will not be different. However, I don't believe that it would be advisable to run a theater based only on superstars; but to make a theater popular to the public, you need superstars. And perhaps the money you invest in their fees is money well invested. If you compare the amounts that are being paid now with the amounts a superstar like Caruso used to get--well, he got more. Naturally, not in figures, because the dollar is not what it used to be. But there were also fewer superstars. Now there will be a great many more superstars.

New York Experiences

- Pfaff: One thing I would like to know is a little more of what you did in New York when you spent the winters there.
- Adler: I coached as much as I wanted to do. Artists liked to coach with me; our apartment was ideally located for them, between the old Met and Carnegie Hall. They liked my work; they liked my family, and they liked to come.

I remember a young woman doctor who came all the way from Harrisburg to New York to coach with me. She came twice a week when she found that she progressed very much.

I conducted opera performances in the surroundings of New York; in Trenton, New Jersey, in Harrisburg; also in the Boston area. Mainly with Metropolitan stars, but with a pick-up orchestra and a pick-up chorus. That was the thing to do. I remember leading Verdi; Martha, Lucia, Aida, Trovatore, and more. I didn't like it very much, but this way I got better known. I also needed the money.

Gradually, I spent shorter and shorter periods in New York, coming back from California in early December. I remember once I worked my way from California to New York, accompanying the mezzo-soprano Claramae Turner in recitals in various places. On the way, one recital was cancelled, and we had to spend more time than planned in Charlotte, North Carolina. There I saw my very first football game in the '40s. I was much impressed, without understanding what it was all about. We performed in Beeville, Texas, in Texarkana, and at Syracuse. Finally, I had to be back in San Francisco as early as the end of February, so there wasn't too much time for the East.

Pfaff: You were saying when you were living on 89th Street in New York, that it was particularly difficult for your wife and children.

Adler: We stayed in one of those remodeled houses with very thin walls, and above us, some girls of Spittani's All-Girl Orchestra lived. They slept in the daytime, performed in the evening, and kept house during the night. They were running the vacuum cleaner and whatnot. And my wife, Diantha, was horrified because they woke up the children, who, at that time, were four or five years old.

So I went upstairs once, to talk to the girls about their using the vacuum cleaner at night. Well, it was between six and seven in the evening, and they were in the midst of a party. They dragged me in, and I stayed there for a long time. My wife didn't know what had happened to me; when I came back, she realized that I had had a couple of drinks. But the Spittani girls didn't use the vacuum cleaner anymore.

Pfaff: Another labor negotiation.

Adler: Could be. [chuckles]

More on Chicago: Madi Bacon

Adler: Now let's talk about the differences in quality of orchestras. The Chicago Opera Orchestra, when seated right in the pit, was a very good orchestra. The Chicago Symphony, under Stock, was excellent. The Illinois Symphony Orchestra was made up of all unemployed musicians, but one was able to get high standards. In my recollection, those orchestras were better than many orchestras I knew before the war in Europe. Over there, in those small cities, the orchestras were quite good, but they were overworked and did not reach the standards of the great orchestras. All American orchestras read very well. European orchestras, on the other hand, did not read so well.

And naturally, in the smaller communities, the standards were frozen, more or less. The musicians didn't move, so you had to work with what you got.

I should also mention my experience in Winnetka, a suburb of Chicago. It was very shortly after my arrival that someone took me on a Sunday afternoon "spin." I heard a chorus of youngsters in a school. I was absolutely flabbergasted at how well they sang. I found out who directed them, and it was Madi Bacon. That was the afternoon which I remembered when Maestro Merola wanted me to find a chorus director for the new Boy's Chorus of San Francisco Opera, which he founded in the '40s. Madi Bacon had moved to San Francisco. I hadn't seen her yet, but I remembered that youth chorus in Winnetka. I had met her in Chicago in the meantime, but not after she had moved west. So I had her come in, and she became the director of the Boy's Chorus. She started it, and started it very well.

Pfaff: Did you recommend her to Merola?

Adler: Yes. I knew she was here, so I brought them together.

After the first meeting, Merola said to me, "Hey, Ha-de-ler, listen-a to me. If you want-a that woman to direct-a the Boy's Chorus, okay. But I never want-a to talk to her anymore." She talked so much, you know. He never liked to listen; he talked a lot himself--most charmingly. He was a man of enormous charm, great interests. Besides girls--he loved girls--he was interested in all kinds of music. Sometimes when you looked for him in the opera house, he was in a rehearsal room. The rehearsal rooms were actually also dressing rooms, because this opera house had not been built with rehearsal rooms originally. There was one bad rehearsal room that was the old chorus room. There were no offices. The War Memorial Opera House had been built as a road house to bring in

ready shows, but not to administer a company or rehearse for a season. That had not been planned for, and that was really unfortunate. Only years later, I succeeded in getting first the addition to the opera house, where we established new office space and rehearsal spaces. And finally came the rehearsal building next to Davies Hall.

Pfaff: The Zellerbach Rehearsal Hall?

Adler: Yes. This was supposed to be named differently--because I had suggested it--and the symphony hall was supposed to be called Zellerbach Hall. Later, because it was decided to call it Louise M. Davies Symphony Hall, the rehearsal building was called Zellerbach Hall, and only the big rehearsal stage is called after me. That is, of course, the Kurt Herbert Adler Rehearsal Stage. I understand that actually no opera house in the world has a better rehearsal stage than this rehearsal stage, even though they ran out of money, and did not quite finish the space. It needs still a little more work, but it is a duplicate of the main stage of the War Memorial Opera House, including the enlarged pit. The orchestra loves to rehearse there, because they have more air and it feels freer than in the opera house. It's a very, very good arrangement. And then there are two other big rehearsal rooms in the basement.

Pfaff: It is a magnificent rehearsal building.

Adler: They even use it for auditions now. I would use the stage sideways. I would put the singers on one side of the stage and listen to them from the other, because I think acoustically that would be advantageous. I learned this in Munich, where, in the Prinzregententheater (which is closed now), I auditioned this way. It worked, and I thought the same would be true for our space, which, I understand, the War Memorial's management rents for auditions sometimes.

Maestro Merola and the San Francisco Opera

Pfaff: What was the reputation around the world of the San Francisco Opera when Merola invited you here?

Adler: It was very well thought of. Because they had the biggest names singing here, all the time; both in leading roles, and really outstanding comprimario singers. The best comprimario singers of the Met would sing here. You may remember that the Met used to

open only in December. So both the San Francisco Opera season and the Chicago Opera season were before the Met's, and those artists were free. And Merola, who was on very friendly terms with them, brought them here. I was very much impressed by people like Cehanovsky, De Paolis, Votipka, who sang smaller roles here. Let's remember the smallest role has its importance.

Naturally, there were all the top names. Not in one season, maybe not in two, maybe not in three seasons; because if you have five weeks of performances, how many singers can you engage? And in Merola's case, the difference from nowadays was that the singers came for more than one role. Because, first of all, he did not schedule more than maybe one or two performances of each opera, and perhaps one more in Los Angeles. But the singers, who had to come mostly by train, didn't want to be on the train for three days and two nights, and then sing only a couple of performances here. So they sang more than one opera. For that reason, it was not possible to engage too many others.

That's how the Cosmopolitan Opera started, and won its fame. The Cosmopolitan Opera had also a very small board. I recall, when Spring Opera actually took over, some of the Cosmopolitan board members [stayed]--but Mr. [Campbell] McGregor was the main money man of Cosmopolitan. If San Francisco Opera could not engage Jussi Björling or Richard Tucker, Mr. McGregor would engage them. Some of the singers were paid very well by him; Mr. McGregor paid more than Merola paid. So they accepted engagements with the Cosmopolitan Opera.

Their standards were not very long lasting. In spite of all the good names, the Cosmopolitan Opera, in my recollection, didn't quite get off the ground. Yet you had to take this company into account, because they had those artists who didn't sing with the San Francisco Opera just then.

There is a lesson that the public in San Francisco had to learn, and I think they have learned it. Some were complaining that they didn't hear their favorite opera, some, their favorite artists. Well, if you want to play only favorite operas, you have to play almost more than a year in a year. Otherwise, you can't have enough operas in the repertoire. So the favorite operas of each individual may come up only every few years. If you want to serve the entire community, you have to change the repertoire. And even then most standard repertoire cannot be played in two seasons; you need at least four or five seasons to go through the most popular works.

Pfaff: Were the Pacific Opera and the Cosmopolitan Opera both active when you arrived?

Adler: No. The Cosmopolitan Opera did not exist. Only Pacific existed, and Merola was supporting it in some ways. The Italian Arturo Casiglia was the conductor and director of the Pacific Opera, which was originally known as Dollar Opera. As time went on, they had to raise their prices, too. But that was worse than instant opera. They had once in a while a good singer, but their standards were really not acceptable.

If you perform on the same stage with lower standards, you suffer from comparisons. The Pacific Opera and San Francisco Opera both performed at the War Memorial. I did not want to keep Spring Opera too long in the opera house, because, in the big house, on the main stage, its young singers would have had to compete with [Licia] Albanese, [Dorothy] Kirsten, [Kirsten] Flagstad, [Jussi] Björling, [Renata] Tebaldi, [Ezio] Pinza, [Mario] Del Monaco, and [Leonard] Warren. That was one of the main reasons I moved Spring Opera Theater into the Curran [Theatre].

Pfaff: What were your first impressions of Merola, both when he called you, and then when you met him?

Adler: Even on the phone, he had enormous charm. His accent was charming, what he said was charming. It was hard to believe the things he said, but he said them so charmingly that you had to swallow them.

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Adler: Incidentally, he spoke French extremely well. He spoke Italian with a Neapolitan accent. I remember when I spoke Italian after having worked with him for a while, they said always, "You don't speak Italian; you speak Neapolitan." Merola was a real Neapolitan.

He was interested in all kinds of music. He had enormous warmth when he conducted. Technically, he was not the easiest conductor to follow. I remember also some remarks in an orchestra rehearsal of Faust. He said, "Hey, listen-a to me! I can't-a hear the basses. You know, I am not a Schoenberg musician: I want-a to hear basses!" That was one of his remarks.

He was very well liked. He succeeded very much because everybody liked him. He wasn't entirely dependable, but you had to forgive him, because of his charming personality.

Pfaff: In what ways was he not dependable?

Adler: Oh, he would make promises and then forget that he had made them; such things. He was a real Neapolitan, with all the charm. That is what the city was all about, at that time.

Well, the story of Merola is very long. He came here first as conductor, then as accompanist, and some of the dowagers liked him very much. He was an extremely good-looking man, and they gave him the money to start the opera, first at Stanford. That's where the San Francisco Opera Company performed at first, and then they performed for years in Civic Auditorium, until, finally, the War Memorial Opera House was built. That was amazing, because it was finished during the Depression years. It opened in 1932.

The opera association served both San Francisco and Los Angeles at that time. In Los Angeles, it performed under the auspices of Bieheimer, who was "the" Los Angeles impresario then. Incidentally, Bieheimer presented the first [La] Bohème performance in the United States, in Los Angeles. It was a fine success.

I worked ten years for Merola, from 1943 to 1953, and I can say with good conscience that when he died, I felt that I had served him well. I went through thick and thin for him in the last years. I had to cover up for him. He really was sick. He stayed away a great deal.

That's probably how the president of the opera, who was a very astute man, very knowledgeable about the opera knew that Merola needed help. That's why, in 1949, I got the title "Assistant to the General Director," which Merola liked. His wife did not. He and I were on very, very friendly terms. We used to eat lunch together--frequently in North Beach, or at the Bohemian Club, or at the Family Club--he belonged to both. And mostly at the old Fior D'Italia, which was where Banducci is now, on Broadway. Our lunches took hours, enlivened by red wine, which Maestro had to drink for health reasons. When I worried about parking tickets (I drove him there), he would say, "Ha-de-ler, this is North Beach. You don't get tickets." I got them regularly, but they were cheaper than my lunch would have been.

Anyhow, I don't think that anybody, in those days, conducted Bohème with more warmth than Merola did--certainly not Toscanini, who conducted a fabulous Bohème. It was one of the reasons that I shied away from that opera after I could select my own works to conduct. Merola's Bohème sticks in my memory as something so special--actually, his Puccini in general.

But he didn't do too much conducting, and as he was physically not in good shape, he did less and less. In his last year, summer 1953, he conducted at the Hollywood Bowl and had a difficult time

there. I think he wanted to prove that this wasn't always the case, and that's why he conducted at Stern Grove a few weeks later. There used to be only one rehearsal on the morning of the concert. Maestro got the orchestra to rehearse for him the morning before the concert. But it rained, and one could not rehearse. So he had to rehearse the morning of the concert, which was a major effort for him. I wasn't there, but I came in the afternoon for the concert. And that was after [Mario] Del Monaco had cancelled the season--and he had an enormous number of performances in his contract--I think fifteen or sixteen performances.

Merola didn't believe that Del Monaco would not come, which would mean ruin for his 1953 season; he said if he only could talk to him personally, he would come. And he talked to him, which was a big deal in those days; you didn't call Europe every day. But Del Monaco insisted he would not come. On Saturday night before the concert, I was rehearsing at the opera house, and a cable arrived; Del Monaco restated that under no circumstances would he come. I did not give the telegraph to Merola before the concert, so he never knew when he died that Del Monaco's cancellation was final, and that there was no hope. Maestro collapsed in the second half of the concert, while conducting "Un bel di" from Madame Butterfly, during the words "per non morir." He fell over the microphone--an unforgettable sound--it was just terrible. The orchestra stopped; total silence in the audience. He never woke up again.

I think that the company in those days, which presented Tebaldi, Albanese, Grace Moore, Björling, Peerce, Del Monaco, Warren, Pinza--was already considered a high-class company. Maestro Merola also brought the conductor William Steinberg here, for Mozart, Wagner, and Verdi. I should mention that I had convinced Merola to engage Georg Solti for 1953. And Merola had engaged [Tullio] Serafin--not very gladly, he was not a great admirer of Serafin's. But he had engaged him. And both Serafin and Solti came during that year, after Merola had died.

Poor Serafin had a very bad stay here. Not only had Merola engaged him for operas which were really not the best for him--they were Boris Godunov, Barber of Seville, and Werther--but Serafin got in a terrible storm on the ocean, and fell while on the boat, and broke a rib. He had all kinds of problems.

Solti led three operas; Elektra, Tristan, and [Die] Walküre--all in his American debut season. So you see, Merola had very good conductors. He had also his friends, like Pietro Cimara, whom he brought here. Cimara was more or less a coach, but he was a protégé of Lily Pons. Lily Pons was a regular in San Francisco because Merola adored her and she adored him, and she brought

Cimara with her to conduct her performances. But Fausto Cleva came, and Pelletier, so there were all kinds of principal conductors.

Erich Leinsdorf was here under Merola already in the 1930s. Stage directors were kind of a problem. There were never enough rehearsals; there was not enough time; the rehearsal schedule was impossible. Frequently the scenery was not in place until the performance. We had a bad incident with Mefistofele, because the scenery stood in the wrong place, and the chorus got into trouble.

You see, Merola, for instance, scheduled Mefistofele. Rossi-Lemeni was a fabulous Mefistofele, with Tagliavini and Sayao and Albanese alternating.

Raoul Jobin, a tenor, was quite popular in those days. He sang Samson here, also Faust and Carmen. It was a company with some performances reaching remarkable standards vocally and musically. Regina Resnik, incidentally, sang Sieglinde those days, with Helen Traubel as Brünnhilde. She also sang Fidelio, and Guttrune in Götterdämmerung.

You see, all the big names came here. They were free during that time; the San Francisco seasons didn't overlap with the Met's. The singers liked to come to San Francisco. It was a little bit like a vacation. There were not too many rehearsals, and the pay wasn't bad, I suppose.

Merola had founded the company, and it reflected his image and personality, with all his virtues, and all his faults. The company had a business manager by the name of Paul Posz, who had to leave at one point because he was presenting private recitals of the top artists, which the board didn't like. He was replaced by Howard Skinner, still under Merola, who was also the symphony manager. Now, when I took over, Howard was still both, but after a while he saw that the opera was growing and growing; the seasons were getting longer and longer, and he was getting older. He had to give up one or the other, so he gave up the symphony and stayed with me, which I appreciated very much.

When he died, I didn't replace him. I only assigned duties differently. That probably led to my having so much to do with money matters. Actually, I didn't like it, because I wanted to be involved more with artistic matters than with financial matters. But I had no manager assisting me. It was all upon me, and I had to raise much money. It finally overwhelmed me.

The Flagstad Affair

Pfaff: One of the artists that I'm curious about, because she was so important at that time, was Flagstad. Did Merola have Flagstad here before the war?

Adler: Yes, of course. I'm sorry I forgot to mention Kirsten Flagstad. She sang Wagnerian roles here, as did the friend of Pinza's, Elisabeth Rethberg, who sang a lot here under Merola. I was here at that time, and when Flagstad came back in 1949, Merola was sick, out of the office. The Veteran's Administration didn't want to rent the opera house to San Francisco Opera if Flagstad, who was considered a Nazi during the war, would appear. The president at that time was Kenneth Monteagle. I was Merola's assistant, and between us, we worked very hard--without going to bed once for twenty-four hours--and finally succeeded in changing the vote of the Veteran's Administration. We got the opera house. But before that, Monteagle had decided that if the opera house would not be available, we could put on the season in the Fox (movie) Theater. That would have been a nightmare, because the Fox was impossible for grand opera--pit, stage, and whatnot.

I admired Mr. Monteagle for his statement, "I am sorry, we are presenting opera; we are not presenting politics. Miss Flagstad is seen everywhere, and I wish to bring her back."

So she came. If I am not mistaken, Ramon Vinay was to sing Tristan opposite her that year. Shortly before the season, he was thrown in prison in his native Chile, so he did not know the role very well when he arrived, although he had a tape of Tristan, which Herman Weigert, the husband of Astrid Varnay, had made for him in Bayreuth. So he could learn the role in jail.

In spite of the fact that he was insecure, he was a wonderful Tristan. Ramon was quite a personality, with warmth and charm which went very well opposite Kirsten Flagstad. It was interesting casting, and Steinberg was the conductor!

Kenneth Monteagle was president during the years Robert Watt Miller was not president. Robert Watt Miller was in the Army, or Navy--anyhow during the war he was not there. When he came back, he did not take over again immediately. But after a while he did, and he remained president for many years.

Pfaff: When you were in the process of negotiating the Flagstad case, was the public sentiment strong too? Or was it just on the part of the veterans?

Adler: I'm sorry, I cannot answer the question. Because at that time I wouldn't have known this, or paid any attention to this. It was not my duty.

I was involved in anything that was in the theater, whether it was rehearsal schedules, casting, making singers feel good (when they got sore, I took the blame), and such things. I had some artistic influence, also, but limited. The company's means were limited, and Merola was particular about other things than I was later on. Of course, I tried to be particular about everything, but he did not. It was not his nature, and he didn't work that way. His entire background as an opera director, or musician, or conductor, was different. He did not have the experience with Max Reinhardt that I had--which mattered so much.

Pfaff: The opera history says that once Flagstad did sing her Isolde, she was very well received, and got a standing ovation--an exception in those days.

Adler: I am sure of it. When she was here, the reaction was incredible. She was so popular in San Francisco. She had also good friends in the society circles and they were very happy about her return.

Pfaff: Tell me a little bit about her as a woman, as a person.

Adler: Frankly, I can't. My memories are so overshadowed by Birgit Nilsson, Rysanek, Schwarzkopf--those German ladies--I was on such friendly terms with all of them that I don't remember very much about Flagstad. After her came Helen Traubel, then Nilsson. Marjorie Lawrence I worked with in Chicago, but not here.

Gaetano Merola's Failing Health

Pfaff: What was the nature of Merola's illness? His heart?

Adler: Among other things, the heart. He went away for a couple of days, frequently, to Sonoma, and took some cures there, and whatnot. He really wasn't well.

Pfaff: Was he already ill when you first came out?

Adler: Not at all when I first came. That was 1943. We are now talking about the period from 1949 to 1953.

Pfaff: So in that period, were you taking over more and more of the responsibilities?

Adler: Yes, without showing it. I "covered up" for Merola.

Pfaff: What do you think it was that he saw in you that made him rely on you so much, and that ultimately got him to choose you as an assistant?

Adler: Well, he never would have agreed if he had not liked me. He liked me very much. As I said, we ate lunch almost always together, and he enjoyed talking and working with me.

One, he had confidence in me. Two, he liked my personality, I guess. Three, he liked whatever talent I had. You know, that was very amusing; he was always complaining about the Italians who came unprepared when they had accepted new roles. He always said, "The Germans never come unprepared. They always know their roles." He really liked the Germans, and especially the Austrians. And he found, probably, my assistance pleasant and helpful.

I cannot remember that he ever reprimanded me for anything. As I told you, I found ways to defend him when he needed to be defended--which was the case sometimes--and I tried to make his last years easier. Not that I really thought that he would pass away. I only thought he was an ill man, and one must watch him.

I remember he had a physician, an Italian. That physician--I don't know if it was the last year, or two years before Merola died--died in a car accident. He drove his car against a tree in the Napa Valley. That affected Merola very much. His name was Dr. Giordano; he was on very friendly terms with Maestro, who was terribly hurt--upset--by his death. I don't know if this had anything to do with his failing health.

Pfaff: What was Merola's wife like?

Adler: I would rather not talk about this. It wasn't his first wife. She was a very energetic lady, who loved the bottle, and caused him frequent problems and embarrassment. Actually, he had left her when he died. He had moved to the Bohemian Club and he stayed there. He just couldn't take it anymore. Life was not easy for him. We all tried to help as much as we could, but then, you know, for a man who wasn't well to live in one room at the Bohemian Club was not the best solution.

Conducting in San Francisco

Pfaff: One thing I'm impressed with is that he had you conduct in your first season here. Was that prearranged?

Adler: I would think so. I came here in June. Merola made arrangements often very late; I am sure that I told him on the phone that I would like to conduct.

I conducted Cavalleria Rusticana--not the double bill, someone else conducted Pagliacci--but I conducted Cavalleria with Dusolina Giannini, who was new to me, and Charlie Kullman, with whom I had worked in Salzburg in Die Meistersinger. He sang his first Stolzinger under Toscanini in 1936, and then he sang with me Turiddu for the first time in the fall of 1943. Charlie and I were always very good friends.

Pfaff: And who was Dusolina Giannini?

Adler: A famous soprano. A very short time ago she was still alive, living in Zurich, and teaching. She was a great soprano, who belonged also to Toscanini's circles. I remember she sang Alice in Flagstaff here. She was an incredible Santuzza, of an intensity that was unbelievable, and this role was also absolutely right in her voice. I shall never forget her.

Pfaff: How many seasons, successively, did you conduct after the first one? Were you a regular conductor?

Adler: While Merola was alive, I think I conducted every year. Not more than one, maximum two performances, he let me conduct. For instance, he used to put a one-act opera before Salome, and I would conduct The Secret of Susanna before Salome. Or Suor Angelica--before Salome!

When I took over as general director, I didn't do this anymore. I had Salome alone. I also conducted my first Forza del Destino when Merola was still alive, with Herva Nelli. And I did also Aida with Herva Nelli, and also with Tebaldi. I remember that Toscanini, who, as is well known, was on extremely close terms with Nelli, asked first who would conduct before he consented to let her sing Aida and Forza. When he learned it was I, it was okay. Poor lady. I remember she was disturbed--probably because there were not enough staging rehearsals. During the "Ritorna vincitor," they changed the set with such noise that she, not being too experienced, was terribly upset.

I conducted Aida when Tebaldi was here first, and with Del Monaco. Both became my good friends. I did a concert in the Hollywood Bowl with Tebaldi.

Later on, I conducted less. The opera's president, Mr. Miller, felt that the development of the theater was such that he did not like Merola to conduct--and he didn't like me to conduct either. He thought that, especially since I made the company grow very fast, all my strength was required to keep it afloat, artistically and financially. So for a few years I did very little conducting, which I missed badly.

Then I came back, and I realized that to conduct one opera a season is really not right. It's not enough. And I could not conduct in other places, either, during that time.

IV TAKING OVER THE SAN FRANCISCO OPERA: THE 1950s

[Interview 4: February 5, 1985] ##

Opera in Wartime

Pfaff: What was the effect of World War II on opera in America, and particularly on opera in San Francisco?

Adler: Foreign singers were very scarce at that time, and those who were here had to be observed, and surveyed, and so on. To my recollection, there were a few who had established residence in the United States, like [Licia] Albanese and [Ezio] Pinza. But I do recall that Pinza had to report somewhere. I don't remember the details, but there was a question how freely they could move around.

Pfaff: Were these State Department rules?

Adler: I suppose so. But that affected, naturally, the operatic life--and now I am talking about casting--in the organizations which used foreign singers.. There were not so many American singers at that time yet; the flourishing of American singers started during and after the war. However, the interest in opera was enormous. It is a rule [that] when times are difficult, or dangerous, or whatnot, people go out, and go after the pleasures and entertainments that are available. Bad times are not bad for theater and opera business.

It is interesting that at the moment we read and hear so much about the dangers of rising ticket prices. That would indicate that the times are good: because the public objects, and perhaps one has reached the maximum of prices that the public will pay. You read here and there, every moment, that the theater and concert and opera are pricing themselves out of business. At the same time, there is the problem how to make up the deficits, which are also rising.

During the war traveling was cut out, at least for the San Francisco Opera. San Francisco Opera used to tour. They were not very long or big tours, but to Portland, Seattle, and so on. That was off during the war. The Los Angeles seasons continued. I came in 1943, and there was a short Los Angeles season that fall, after the San Francisco season. And we went to Sacramento. Actually, at that time we went three times--in short seasons. Almost every week, or every other week, we played one night in Sacramento.

Later on--and I don't think it was during the last years of the war, it was after the war--we went back to Portland and Seattle. We stopped also in Fresno, after Los Angeles. (The artists would say, "Fres-NO"--they didn't like to go there. We played in the old auditorium, and not the much better new auditorium that they have now.) We stopped also once in Bakersfield, and in San Diego. The San Diego performances increased after the war. We went almost every week to Los Angeles, to San Diego; first to a high school auditorium, and then we opened a nice new auditorium. They had a very good auditorium down there, with excellent acoustics. I don't remember now if it was before or after the Pavilion, in Los Angeles --but about the same time the Pavilion was finished, we played in the San Diego auditorium, which, to my recollection, had better acoustics than the Pavilion.

Pfaff: Is the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion where you played in Los Angeles?

Adler: We played, in Los Angeles, in the Shrine Auditorium most of the time, which has a seating capacity of over five thousand. In 1965, I believe it was, we played one season in the Pavilion. It was a disastrous season as far as attendance went, because we had a public in Los Angeles. We played to very high capacity in the big Shrine Auditorium, therefore the prices were not so high. The ticket prices in the Pavilion had to be increased enormously, and the public stayed away. There were also internal politics involved, and the popularity of the Pavilion in the beginning was not very high. So we played there only one season, and then we stopped going to Los Angeles.

We used to go to Los Angeles after the San Francisco season, up until approximately Thanksgiving. We stopped after the '65 season; we didn't go back to Los Angeles until March '69. And in spite of the fact that we had not been in Los Angeles for several years--and we had not been in the Shrine Auditorium since '64--we had a pretty good season in the Shrine Auditorium. But we still couldn't continue, because there was not enough financial support down there. The board of the San Francisco Opera felt we couldn't lose more money in Los Angeles, and if we wanted to lose more than

we lost in the San Francisco seasons, then we should perhaps play here longer.

Pfaff: Was it difficult to mount a touring season in March?

Adler: Well sure. It was a completely different set-up. Of course, this all changed gradually. Originally, when San Francisco played both San Francisco and Los Angeles--short seasons: San Francisco was about five weeks, and Los Angeles was ten days--many of the artists remained here. There were no provisions for transportation expenses, which became more and more costly. Later, when the "flying singers" arrived, they wouldn't stay for an entire season. Also, when you lengthen the season, and especially when you have a separate season, Los Angeles had to absorb all the transportation costs from the East, or from Europe, or wherever artists were coming from, besides the movement San Francisco-Los Angeles-San Francisco, of course, of orchestra, singers. So financially, it was a big difference.

Singers and Traveling

Adler: There was also a very big difference in the spirit of the season when singers couldn't travel as freely, and as far, and as often, as they did after the war. It became more and more evident that this was where we were going. So singers would travel two nights and three days, or three nights and two days, from the East Coast to San Francisco, and those who came from Europe came by boat, which was another five to seven days each way. Naturally they preferred to stay longer in one place. That had great advantages, also, because they established a closer relationship to the organization with which they were performing, as well as with the city, the public. When people come in and go out after a very few performances, this is not the same spirit, not the same feeling, not the same artistic and personal involvement.

One tries to keep singers as long as possible. The year Maestro Merola died, 1953, he had engaged [Mario] Del Monaco for, I think, fifteen or sixteen performances in five weeks. So naturally, between here and Los Angeles, Del Monaco stayed in California. He didn't like to fly, so in his case it wasn't difficult. But nowadays, the entire mentality has changed; especially in Europe, where singers fly an hour or an hour and a half from one opera center to the next. Everything is different. I don't think it is to the good.

At the same time there were singers who had a very small repertoire. Naturally, if you don't stay, like they used to stay, in one place for six, seven, eight weeks, you can do with a few operas, and sing the same opera in New York, London, San Francisco, Paris, Vienna, La Scala, Stockholm--why not? It's a completely different artistic life.

Pfaff: And that's more the way it is now, you think?

Adler: It is much more so now.

Pfaff: So people had to learn more roles then?

Adler: Yes. The repertoire was much wider. And then like, [Jussi] Björling or Del Monaco, to talk about two leading tenors, they had a fairly large repertoire.

I have my questions about this traveling of opera companies. Because it is sure that if you travel a longer time, the standards of the performances will go down. Everybody tires--and that is true for the orchestra, the chorus, the stagehands who travel with the company, and the casts. It becomes more and more difficult, really, to stir up the fire that is necessary to get those wonderful performances which the Germans call a Sternstunde: the hour of stars during the opera performance.

Also, naturally, performing in different auditoriums, the scenery doesn't quite fit, the orchestra is not comfortable, the lighting is not the best, the change of scenery becomes difficult; all this is not really helpful to doing the best one can. Nowadays, you talk about sharing a great deal: co-productions, and whatnot. Well, this is also a question of time, or a question of enterprise, to have those co-productions. We have talked about the development of stage design, for instance. If the same scenery, the same costumes are used in two, three, four theaters, then the art of stage design will not develop any further.

The top directors use the same design for many theaters nowadays. That was not the case in earlier days.

You talk about the war. Well, first are the wives of the people who stayed home: older men, women of all ages--many were men who were in the war--that has some influence on the mentality of the public. Why do they go? For what reasons do they go to the theater, to opera, to concerts? But they went.

I don't remember that there was a shortage of talent, which surprises me, because there were many men and women who joined the armed forces. Some had to; some did. But I don't remember that we

couldn't find musicians, or singers, or stagehands because they were in the war. At the same time, if the war had lasted longer, that might have affected the artistic life of the country.

There were some signs. In San Francisco, the president of the opera was away in the war, and he had to be replaced. So there certainly were effects. I remember the women volunteered for all kinds of purposes; ladies who helped our organization. In the earlier days of the operatic field, people, citizens rendered many services to the opera. I remember in the very early days, we borrowed props from private people, and sometimes those people were involved with helping the Red Cross, or whatnot. So there must have been some problems.

I didn't feel this so much. At that time, I was taking care of my chorus, and I conducted some performances, but I didn't feel those problems, and I didn't have to care about box office. But, it seems to me, to my recollection, we sold out everything.

The question was, "What did the war do?" Well, there were other problems which one had to overcome. There were some foreign publishers whose music one couldn't obtain.

Pfaff: Were they all German?

Adler: No, no. Italian too. Especially German and Italian. But the repertoire at that time was a more conservative repertoire, obviously. In the standard operas, except for some Puccini (talking about Italian), each company owned the material.

We started talking about the public. I remember that in San Francisco--being the embarkation point for the war in the Pacific--there were large numbers of soldiers, sailors, and marines. They came to the opera. We saw many servicemen in uniform. It is probable that in difficult times not all went to the baths and the nightclubs. There were enough who had serious interests, and preferred whatever opera could do for their emotional and mental life to the other form of entertainment, which, of course, was abundant in San Francisco.

Pfaff: You spoke earlier about having to survey and watch over the artists. What did the German and Italian artists do? Did they have to check in with people periodically?

Adler: Yes. They had some kind of "responsible escorts"; parole officers, whatever you want to call it. They had to check in at official spots, and then there were certain people who, officially or not officially, had to watch that nothing happened. And to my recollection, nothing ever happened.

Pfaff: Were these people going in and out of Germany and Italy, too, at the time, or did they have to make a choice?

Adler: No, they had to make a choice. But, you know, I just remembered. You asked about problems. We older people remember that traveling was very difficult. Everything went by train in those days, and the trains were overcrowded; there were not enough of them, and they served very poor food, and so on. And therefore artists didn't care too much to travel through the country. Again, when they traveled, they preferred to stay, and we didn't engage them, like now, for four or five performances. Now if they give you six, you are lucky. You've noticed in the casting reports that when a company does the same opera more often, that they have to change many roles after three, four, performances, and replace artists, because they won't stay so long.

Touring with the Company

Pfaff: When the company was touring, and you were new to the company, what were your responsibilities on tours? Were they very different from when you were at home?

Adler: No, because as a rule we toured after the season. I remember that one year we toured before the season opened in San Francisco, with three operas, to Portland and Seattle, but, otherwise, the repertoire was rehearsed, and there were few rehearsals. So, one had to supervise or conduct what was happening in performances, and see to it that there were some rehearsals, either to adjust for different auditoriums, or, when an opera had not been performed in a while, we had to have refresher rehearsals. But there were fewer rehearsals then, in San Francisco.

Can I ask you, what did you mean, "different duties?"

Pfaff: Well, I was wondering if your administrative duties increased when you had to see to getting a whole company moved to Los Angeles.

Adler: No. Well, we were talking now about the war. Or were you talking about later on?

Pfaff: Well, just touring in general.

Adler: Touring in general, when I ran the company, of course you feel like a father hen. You worry about everything. You hope that nobody really gets astray in the strange city. I remember one performance

we gave in San Diego--it was Il Trovatore--and [Ettore] Bastianini, who was singing Luna, didn't arrive. He wanted to drive his own car. We were offering transportation; we rented limousines for the principal artists, to take them from Los Angeles to San Diego. However, he said, "Oh, no, I have my own car." Well, he didn't arrive until curtain time, and we were terribly worried. In those days I, frankly, did not have covers with me on those excursions. And then good Ettore arrived as though nothing had happened. We all were practically dead from worry.

Actually, those things happen all the time. Administrative duties are continuous, because you never work only on the present season. You work also on the coming seasons, or on new ideas, and so forth, new productions.

But here in San Francisco, there was a performance of Marriage of Figaro. Hans Hotter, who sang the Count, was staying in Sausalito. There was an accident on the Golden Gate Bridge; he couldn't get through. And we were terribly worried. Such things happen, especially in a city like this, where you depend on two bridges and cannot enforce that the personnel live in the city. So we had problems, sometimes, with orchestra musicians getting delayed. I remember there was once an accident on one of the bridges, and there were six or seven key instrumentalists involved. So we couldn't start; we had to wait until they came.

Pfaff: How long did the company continue touring, and why did it stop?

Adler: One reason--and I think it was an intended reason, on my part at least--was to encourage the local opera companies to develop. As we know, there is a company in Seattle, there is a company in Portland, there is a company in Sacramento, there is a company in San Diego. There is even a company in Los Angeles. It is a different type company than the San Francisco Opera; it is not a "star" company, per se. Sometimes they have one star singer in their cast. But it is a good company, and I must say that some of the young artists of San Francisco have performed in the Los Angeles Opera Theater now. Take Susan Quittmeyer, the mezzo-soprano, who had her first major successful try-out as the Composer in Ariadne [Auf Naxos] down there, which worked out extremely well. And Fresno has had an opera company for a while.

Well, I saw this coming, and I supported it. In the days when the Portland Opera Company was about to be born, we were in Los Angeles. Mary Costa and I flew up from Los Angeles to an opera luncheon, in order to speak to the people of Portland and ask them for support for the new Portland Opera. And I think, you know, that the numbers of opera companies has increased enormously in the United States in the last decade, which is a healthy sign. It is

one of the art forms which grew most in our country. I do hope that the efforts of the San Francisco Opera contributed to this.

Taking Over the San Francisco Opera: 1953 ##

Pfaff: We need to be more specific about the transition between Merola's death and your gradually assuming the general directorship.

Adler: I think I mentioned that at a dinner in Los Angeles, Mrs. Dorothy Chandler toasted the new general director.

Well, when Merola died it was ten days before the San Francisco Opera's 1953 season. He had not been well, but he had conducted at the Hollywood Bowl. I don't think it was very easy for him, and not too successful, so he wanted to prove he could to it. And that's why he conducted the Stern Grove concert here, the end of August. He died while conducting "Un bel di," the Butterfly aria, with the words "per non morir." In this moment, he fell over, and didn't regain consciousness.

And subsequently, I was asked to run the season without telling anybody that I had been asked. That was a problem, because there was a conductor, [Fausto Cleva], who wanted to succeed Merola, and, obviously, he was not very sympathetic when a younger man, a chorus director, was to succeed Merola. However, the chorus played a very important part, those days, in the San Francisco Opera. Because, one, it was really the body of the chorus which was exclusively San Francisco Opera, while the orchestra was mostly shared with the symphony, and the singers were mostly coming from other places. But the chorus was San Francisco Opera. Furthermore, it was very good; it was really an excellent chorus. Therefore, the strengths of the chorus, in all respects, had to be considered by everybody.

I remember that opening night of 1953--I think it was Mefistofele--I was still conducting backstage. The conductor, Cleva, didn't like to help me. There was no closed-circuit television there, and so one had to look through a hole in the scenery to follow him. He was short, and, on top of it, he was conducting below the stand, so I had a very hard time following his beat while I had to conduct backstage, at the same time, the chorus, a banda, the organ, and the boy's chorus. It is one of those difficult backstage things. I wish that all conductors would go through this, because many of them have no idea how difficult it is to handle the backstage tasks.

Of course, I couldn't say no. I had worked with Merola on putting the season together. The first problem I faced was the replacement of [Mario] Del Monaco; that meant fifteen, sixteen performances. Dorothy Kirsten, who sang several roles that season, had to leave because her husband was very ill. I remember that Licia Albanese very kindly assumed to sing many roles for which she had not been engaged. We had one bit of tough luck after the other. But we came through. A big success was Turandot.

Harry Horner and Paul and Gitta Hager

Adler: That was also the beginning of my association with Harry Horner. Harry Horner had been an actor in his younger days in Vienna, and I knew him from the Reinhardt Theater where he performed the student in Reinhardt's production of Faust. I had met him then, in 1933, and now we are talking about 1953. In the meantime, he had moved to Hollywood and had both designed and directed movies there.

In preparation of the 1953 season, there was an unassigned production of Turandot--unassigned as far as the stage designer went. Maestro Merola was ill, and I was asked if I could suggest somebody. Well, I looked through who had designed successfully for the San Francisco Opera before, and I ran into the name of Harry Horner, whom I had known for twenty years. He had not worked in San Francisco while I was there, but he had designed Elektra and Fidelio, and some other productions. I suggested him, and the president of the board, with whom I was talking about this, was delighted that I came up with Horner's name. And so was Merola.

When Merola came back from his illness, Harry Horner came up from Los Angeles with drawings. He didn't know that it was my suggestion to bring him back here. I knocked on his door and spoke from behind the door, in German, a quotation from Goethe's Faust, which he immediately remembered from Reinhardt's Faust in 1933. And when I opened the door, it was--you know, there are moments in one's life when you have an immediate contact. He was a very warm person.

Pfaff: What was the quote from Faust?

Adler: It was a line of Mefisto. He knocks at Faust's door, Mefisto--and that was the famous actor, Max Pamberg, in Vienna--and says, "Du musst es dreimal sagen...": "You have to say it three times," that he should come in. That was Mefisto at the study of Faust. Well, that was my entrance, you know.

Subsequently, when Harry took care of Turandot, we got closer and closer. He finally moved here, and he was my advisor for all scenic things for a couple of seasons. It was really a wonderful relationship, and I think he would have stayed longer if he wouldn't have been pushed by some parties to rather concentrate on Hollywood, where there was much more money. But he enjoyed it; he was very musical. For Merola he had only designed scenery and costumes, but I used him also as director.

It was he, for instance, who was the director when Leontyne Price made her big company debut in The Dialogues of the Carmelites. He had designed the scenery for that production and directed it, and I remember very well--he was a highly emotional young man (or he wasn't so young, but he looked terribly young; a very thin man)--that when he wanted something from those nuns, he would go on his knees and pray, practically. It's unforgettable to me.

He did also the first Flying Dutchman in San Francisco. It was his scenery. I don't think he directed it. At that time Paul Hager was already here. He had been recommended to me by a San Francisco singer, Désirée Risetti, who had appeared at the opera house in Nuremberg, in Germany. Risetti had worked there with this young German director who she thought would be very helpful for San Francisco. I said, "Okay, I'll try him."

I started contacting Hager and establishing some kind of relationship, and I had enough confidence that I brought him here. And Paul Hager--who has died in the meantime--came to San Francisco at the right moment for San Francisco and for himself. For several years, he was very important for the San Francisco Opera company. He was strongly supported by the then-President Robert Watt Miller. He made a lot of enemies in other circles, but it always happens when a man of great intelligence and talent works perhaps too much somewhere, that people become jealous and negative. But in retrospect, probably, it will be seen that Paul Hager contributed a great deal to the growth of the San Francisco Opera, both artistically and in the international importance of the company.

Pfaff: He was very young when he arrived, wasn't he? Twenty-eight, I think.

Adler: Very young. He spoke very poor English then. Just recently I conducted Fidelio in Sydney, and we struggled with the stage direction of the last scene, where the chorus is joined by the prisoners coming out of Pizarro's dungeon. I'll never forget when Paul Hager directed that scene and staged it with the chorus in an hour and twenty minutes--in spite of the fact that his command of the English language was terribly limited. Before the chorus took

its break after the hour and twenty minutes, they applauded Hager enthusiastically. He mispronounced God knows what, but nobody laughed, because he was so strong and serious in his intentions that he convinced the people. That is one thing I'll never forget.

He did other things that, perhaps, were less his meat, you know. I remember he did La Bohème, for instance; he even appeared in that performance, in the second act, in the Cafe Momus scene. He had all kinds of ideas which he hadn't tried out. He was full of ideas. But afterwards he made a big career. He was one of Herbert von Karajan's favorite stage directors at the opera in Vienna, where he also was very much involved in administration. His wife, Ghita Hager--the wife of those days; he had later on another wife--was enormously, enormously helpful to him. She had been in the ballet in Munich, I think. She was born in Lithuania and was a genius in languages, with an incredible memory. She knew from memory the texts of all the operas--in any language--she and Hager were involved with. That was very helpful. She could help with missing cues, and so forth. For the lighting, which in those days became much better than it had been in San Francisco, but still was quite primitive, she was very good. [She] knew what lighting instruments were available (which were really not many and not very good at that time) and knew them very, very well, and handled them as well as she could.

Pfaff: So they were married at the time that he came?

Adler: They were married at that time.

Pfaff: Was the Flying Dutchman, with Hotter, the first thing that he directed for you?

Adler: No, I don't think so. I don't remember what his first production was. [La Bohème 1954]

Pfaff: Was it that season that he came? Did you bring him for '53?

Adler: No. The '53 season was Merola's season. It would be the '54 season. Merola--and perhaps I had something to do with it too--it was Solti's American debut, and Georg conducted three operas here that season. It was Elektra, Tristan, and Die Walküre. Elektra was the most successful one.

Maestro Serafin came along that year, when Merola was not alive anymore. He was not a particular friend of Maestro Serafin, and I don't know what would have happened, during that season, if he had been here. I admired Serafin very much, and I tried to make it as easy for him as possible. He was an old man already. But he

was not assigned the right operas that year when he came, and that was also a problem.

Pfaff: Was that Merola's doing?

Adler: Yes.

A Toast to the New Director

Adler: In 1953 I had to handle the replacements for the cancellations. The most difficult one was Del Monaco's replacement. Besides [there were] the daily chores: supervising the schedule, and seeing to it that the discipline wouldn't lag. I believe it went well. But the board of the San Francisco Opera did not tell me that they wanted me to succeed Merola during this season. At the end of the season in Los Angeles, there was a dinner at the house of Henry Dukey, a very nice man, a lawyer who was on the Los Angeles board.

Pfaff: The name again, please?

Adler: Henry Dukey. A famous Los Angeles family and law firm.

At that dinner, Mrs. Chandler, who was the leading musical figure during those days, gave a toast to the new general director of the San Francisco Opera. And caught me, and others, perhaps--but certainly me--by surprise. It was the night of Turandot, before the performance, and I remember I left Henry Dukey's house late, with all that toasting and celebrating, and they wouldn't start the performance in the Shrine Auditorium without me. But those days they didn't have the freeways, and the traffic to the Shrine was just terrible. I tried to get there faster and faster, violated every traffic regulation, and got arrested. I got a hundred-and-fifty-dollar ticket, which in 1953 was a lot--I never paid it. I don't know if the Los Angeles Philharmonic, which sponsored the visit of the San Francisco Opera, paid it, or if Henry Dukey, who was a police commissioner also, had it revoked. Anyhow, that was one of the largest tickets I got. Then we did Turandot.

I probably conducted the chorus backstage. That evening my head was so full, that I don't remember anything now that I did.

Pfaff: Was your head full because you had just been toasted as the new general director?

Adler: Well sure. I mean, then you start thinking, how are you going to proceed?

We were talking about the title. I said to the president of the opera, I really would rather not have the same title Merola had, which was "general director." The title "general director," in those years, was unique. I don't think there were many general directors in opera in the United States. They were mostly "general managers," or whatnot.

We were talking back and forth, and finally settled for "artistic director." So I became artistic director--but doing, really, everything that a general director would do. Then a few years later I accepted the title "general director," because it was appropriate. You lose a little bit the reticence of taking something that was, in my mind, unique for Merola, the title of general director. So I accepted it.

Pfaff: How quickly after you were toasted did the board make it clear to you what their intentions were?

Adler: I'm not quite sure. I think it was when I came back to San Francisco after the Los Angeles season.

Pfaff: Who was the conductor who wanted the position?

Adler: Fausto Cleva. Among others.

Pfaff: Wasn't there a problem at the time, with his conducting more at the Met, and not being able to conduct in San Francisco so much?

Adler: Well, I re-engaged Cleva, because I thought very highly of him as a conductor. There were problems. One year, he couldn't finish the Los Angeles season. He did the San Francisco season, but he could not stay for Los Angeles. Paul Breisach, who was also from the Met, agreed to conduct the operas Cleva had conducted in Los Angeles.

You see, Cleva had been the chorus director at the Metropolitan for a long time, and a splendid chorus director he was. The chorus, those days, was very good. It is now, again, but there were interim years where everybody complained about the Met chorus, because they couldn't find the right chorus director.

It is difficult to advance in the same theater. It is an amazing thing, that I got the support that I needed to rise in the same organization, from chorus director and conductor to general director. Cleva had some problems. He sometimes was very difficult to work with.

Remembering Some Conductors: Leinsdorf, Solti, Steinberg, Monteux

Adler: Leinsdorf did not want to become the director. He had conducted here, too. He was here before I became the director of the company, and afterwards. I had some problems about his style of talking to the orchestra here. Although Mr. Leinsdorf chose some very strange words in his book about me, he maintained that he didn't go back to San Francisco because he did not wish to be employed in a theater where I was the director, although he spoke very well about my talent. But obviously he wanted to express that he didn't like me. I must say that I did not re-engage him because I had some problems with unions about his, as I called it, style of behavior.

Pfaff: Was he abusive?

Adler: Yes. I was told that there would be problems with the orchestra if he would come back.

Pfaff: And so he didn't conduct thereafter in San Francisco?

Adler: No. He didn't come back because he refused; he didn't come back because I couldn't engage him.

Pfaff: And that was it for him.

Adler: That was it. I was absolutely amazed when I read this in his book, because we had been on very friendly terms, privately, afterwards. And very shortly before he published his book, I visited him. He had an apartment in Lausanne, and I came from Geneva to Lausanne for dinner, to his apartment. And I visited with him at his Fifth Avenue apartment in New York.

I mention this not because of Erich Leinsdorf. It shows the strange things that happen in the world of artists. Basically, I had a very bad reputation as being difficult. Well, the difficulty that I caused others was that when I believed in something, I tried to put it over. And that needed, naturally, strength of will. By pussy-footing, you don't get where you want to get in the opera world. And perhaps the fact that I had to accept--not gladly--that people were saying I was difficult, helped the San Francisco Opera to attain the rank which it finally assumed.

Maybe others could have been very sweet, and very nice, but since I was working so hard, I didn't have the time to be sweet and nice. Maybe not the personality, but certainly not the time.

Pfaff: Since you'd worked with both these men in Salzburg, with Toscanini, how was your relation with Solti?

Adler: Oh, very friendly. Solti grew very fast, as you know. He became great and successful. In those days, I simply was not able to offer him enough rehearsal hours to bring him back here. But, privately, Solti and I are on extremely friendly terms. When I was in London, we were together there; we got together in Chicago. Even now, Lady Solti sends gifts to my children. Georg and I have something in common, not that he's as old as I am.

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Adler: Solti adored his children, the two girls. To watch the baths of his two little girls was more important than anything else to Georg. And of course, I adore my children, so we have this in common. Lady Solti is very considerate of my children.

We had a very nice time last year in Chicago. I gave some lectures there, and he did the First Mahler [Symphony] with the Chicago Symphony. I was with his wife, in their box, and then we went backstage. I stayed at the same hotel the Soltis did, by chance. So our relationship has lasted over many years.

Pfaff: How young a man was he when you invited him to San Francisco?

Adler: I did not invite him. I recommended him to Merola, because Merola was still in charge. But I was handling the business already, as his assistant, in those days. I wouldn't think that it is appropriate to say that I brought Georg to America.

Pfaff: What was he like then, and why was his Elektra the best thing he did that season?

Adler: I think that Solti always has been a nervous type of man and conductor, to whom the type of intensity which Elektra offered was especially suited. The nervousness that is so predominant in Tristan at that time was also closer to him than the Ring pathos, the broad lines of Wagner in the Ring. I would think that now the Ring would be, in a way, extremely suited to Solti. I think it would be not a Furtwängler, or Knappertsbusch Ring, but it would be more a very special Solti Ring. And I believe he is about to conduct the Ring in London, if I am not mistaken.

Pfaff: And he did that first summer in Bayreuth, with the last production.

Adler: Well, that didn't go so well. Because the system in Bayreuth, rehearsal system, the behavior even of the people, everything, is something that may not be quite easy for Solti to participate in. I was rather unhappy when I noticed last year, after he cancelled it; it was resented by the public and by other people in Bayreuth. Someone else took over for him, and I hoped he would do it. I accepted the invitation to go to Bayreuth; I hoped to hear his Ring.

I had discussed Solti's return to the San Francisco Opera, actually. We were talking about the possibility of the Ring, but, more particularly, about Falstaff. And there it was very interesting how we were not of the same opinion about stage directors. It didn't work out, as one noticed, but Georg and I had different ideas.

Another conductor who was important for the San Francisco Opera was William Steinberg. I remember that Steinberg conducted Lohengrin here when we were on the first tour to Portland and Seattle. I remember walking with Steinberg from the hotel to the performance place, and he said, "Well, how will it be?" And I said, "Maestro Steinberg, that depends on you." We had a very close personal relationship, Steinberg and I. It was a friendly relationship.

Then, of course, came [Pierre] Monteux. Monteux, who was the music director of the San Francisco Symphony, did not accept to conduct opera in San Francisco before he resigned from the symphony. However, when he resigned, I was able, to everybody's surprise, to get him to conduct Honegger's Joan of Arc (designed and directed by Harry Horner, by the way), as well as Fidelio and Manon, in one season at San Francisco.

Monteux was a great musician and conductor. He had his own style. I recall that the German artists in Fidelio had some problems accepting Monteux's interpretation of Fidelio. But it was a great performance. The Honegger Joan of Arc, which is not opera really, is a concert drama, which we made into a music theater piece. Harry Horner made it an enormous spectacle. I remember that Alfred Frankenstein, who was then the main critic of the San Francisco Chronicle, and of San Francisco, wrote about Joan of Arc on the front page.

Harry Horner and I looked for the actors--the main roles are actors--for a long time. I was in Hollywood, talking to Hollywood artists whom Harry knew best, of course. We finally came up with Dorothy McGuire as Joan, and Lee Marvin as Frère Dominic. So there were two strong personalities.

I met Dorothy a couple of years ago at Harry Horner's house in Los Angeles, at dinner. We were talking about those days. It was 1954. It was an incredible thing that the San Francisco Opera was able to come out with something as complicated as a production of Joan of Arc, which Horner conceived.

We didn't give it alone: the same night, if I'm not mistaken, we did L'Osteria Portogese by Cherubini. I would probably, in later years, not have scheduled anything before Joan of Arc, in spite of the short evening it would have been. But in those days, I thought one has to have the people sit for their money for a longer time than I did later on. In earlier days, it was customary to do something before Salome, before Elektra. As a matter of fact, I personally conducted operas before Salome, reluctantly, when Merola was alive. It was the Wolf-Ferrari Secret of Susanna or Suor Angelica, as a big contrast. Before Elektra, I think I did Beethoven's Prometheus ballet once.

I'm glad to say that this is absolutely not necessary anymore. But in those days, one had to do such things. Perhaps I was influenced by Merola, who taught me such things were necessary or taught me it was necessary. I learned a great deal from Merola. I was terribly devoted to him, and I am very glad that when he died I had the feeling, and I think the right to say I had served him well for ten years.

But I learned also things which didn't have to be done. I learned how to do it, and how not to do it. One thing, for instance, was that an opera is strong enough, you should not think of the playing time, but you should think of the impact the work will make on the audience. Certainly works like Elektra or Salome are strong enough that you do not have to have a curtain opener. Frankly, an opera like Suor Angelica, which is so emotional, seems to me to be too much for one evening with Salome.

I love Suor Angelica, and I remember doing it with various singers. I liked especially Licia Albanese. One year, she had lost her baby in a miscarriage and sang a short time after that Suor Angelica. It was a performance where I never will forget how it affected her, how it affected me, and, through us, the audience. And also we had a wonderful man in the audience--that was Giuseppe di Stefano--who was so touched that now--and it must be, well, more than thirty years later--whenever I run into him, he says to me, "When are you going to conduct Suor Angelica for me again?"

Memorials for Gaetano Merola

Adler: Incidentally, going back to 1953, Licia Albanese did a performance of Madame Butterfly a short time after Merola died, in the middle of the 1953 season. For Licia, as well as for me, it was somehow a memorial for Merola, in that season. We never could get to the "Un bel di." We never rehearsed it, because we felt we couldn't get over it in the rehearsal--because Merola had died while conducting "Un bel di." So we did this performance, and it worked out that it was so intense and so touching, everybody was standing in the wings backstage and felt what this performance meant.

The next year, it must have been early 1954, I scheduled a memorial concert for Merola, doing the Verdi Requiem, which Clevea conducted. And if I remember right, three of the soloists were Albanese, Claramae Turner, Jan Pearce, all artists who Merola liked very much, and who loved Merola. The chorus was not only the San Francisco Opera Chorus; we accepted other qualified singers. There were many solo singers who wanted to sing in this, in memory of Merola. I don't remember having heard a chorus of that beauty and strength; strength both in force and in lyric moments.

I remember that we used the small symphony set on the stage of the opera house, and that created a sound with those approximately hundred and twenty voices which was unique, absolutely unique.

The Merola Fund and the San Francisco Opera Auditions

Adler: This concert, where many--if not all--didn't accept any compensation, was what started the Merola Fund. The monies left over from this concert were the original funds for the Merola Fund.

Then the next step, really, were the San Francisco Opera Auditions. When I went to New York to look for new talent, I found there were many, many singers coming from the West, sitting around in New York. When I asked them, "Why didn't you sing for me in San Francisco?", they thought there was no opportunity to do this. I thought, "Well, we have to find a format to do this."

I remember flying back to Los Angeles from New York. I talked to Florence Atherton Irish, who was still a very strong power in the Los Angeles musical life at that time, and I told her I wanted to start San Francisco Opera Auditions. She was the first one who threw the support of the Opera Guild of Southern California behind me. I had already, more or less, the Auditions assured before I

came back to San Francisco. Then, of course, when I told them that Los Angeles would support it, and Florence Irish would support it, the San Francisco people and the Merola Fund people were enthusiastic about the idea.

The first year, 1957, those auditions were open only to singers who originated from the West. Because the idea was, I had the impression that those young singers from the West in New York were sitting there, and didn't know the ropes in this big city as well as the eastern people. They had to spend a lot of money, and I thought it was only right that they could be heard first in San Francisco or in Los Angeles. And so it became San Francisco Opera Auditions, and started the Merola Opera Program, and so on.

Pfaff: How was the money from the Fund used?

Adler: Oh, it was used for all kinds of things. There was more money needed, as always, but we started the Merola Program.

Opera in Los Angeles

Adler: But it was really this trip to New York and the return to Los Angeles, where, in the talks between Florence Irish and me, the San Francisco Opera Auditions were born. Florence Irish was a very strong supporter of the San Francisco Opera, and at the same time, of me. I have every reason to be grateful, because as long as she was active and around, she really helped me and helped the San Francisco Opera in Los Angeles a great deal. Which didn't make it any easier, necessarily, because there were problems, locally, in Los Angeles. Fortunately, I always greatly admired Los Angeles. I think a community where people like Bruno Walter, Heifetz, Horowitz, Schoenberg, and so on, settled down and lived happily--there must be a lot to the city life and to the city, and the people there.

But I found that this unfortunate rivalry between San Francisco and Los Angeles caused problems for our opera to go there. Because Los Angeles felt, and rightly so, they should have their own opera. I was really hoping that I would find a solution for them, to create a situation where the San Francisco Opera could serve both cities. I thought I had it settled, and it didn't work out after all. I didn't want to retire before having done this. As it looks to me at the very moment (which can change tomorrow there), it won't happen. It was quite close, my successor has also tried to bring the San Francisco Opera back to Los Angeles. I don't know if it will work.

They have a director there, a very capable man, who is supposed to work towards the creation of an opera company. Naturally, nowadays it is much, much, more expensive to start a company from scratch than it would have been a while ago.

There is something interesting about the art form of the opera. When you read the history of music, you find that in critical days for music--that goes back centuries--opera was frequently a saving and uniting factor. Just as opera is a factor which causes rifts, it sometimes united the forces behind music, or the public. As we well know, in Europe, where it originated in a time of royalty (or aristocracy), the emperors, the kings, the counts, the princes, they felt they had to support the opera, or I really think, they loved the opera. It belonged to a court to have a court opera.

Then, when the monarchies started to collapse after the First World War, the governments of the various countries felt they had to support the opera companies. It is well known that nowadays in Austria, for instance, the Vienna Opera is very generously supported, considering the small country Austria is. At the same time, behind the Iron Curtain the governments support the operas, too. Of course, there everything is the state. I don't know if Russia, for instance, would have opera of importance. One doesn't know exactly how it is nowadays, because one gets there once in a while, and then you see a few performances. I was there. I saw much too much Rimsky-Korsakov, if you ask me. I saw the Bolshoi performances, and I saw performances at the opera house in Leningrad, standard opera, which were not too good. They are supported, but you don't know what the standards really are.

On Contemporary Opera

Adler: And we have not heard new works. We will have to talk about new operas: Are they composed? Are they not composed? Do we know now --which I say we don't, but we'll probably know fifty, hundred years later--if there are any masterworks created during our days. I grew up with the operas of [Richard] Strauss, which, so far, have lasted. I think that there are some English opera composers who will last. I certainly think that some works of Tippett will last. An opera like Peter Grimes is, in my book, really a masterpiece. I think it will not only last, I think it will become more popular. Britten, of course, is perhaps the most played composer who was contemporary; he died not so long ago. I don't know about Shostakovich.

I should mention that I produced Katerina Ismailova, which was a watered-down version of Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk. I did it in English first. It was a big success. I had seen the original version, Lady Macbeth, in Dusseldorf in Germany, where, through some channels, Maestro Alberto Erede had succeeded in getting the material, because the Russians wouldn't allow a performance of it. But he had it, and I was very much impressed. Then when it was possible to get the Katerina Ismailova raw material, I did it. And it was a success. Some people were wondering, but it could be considered a success. Then when Lady Macbeth became available, and I did it in Russian, then it was a real big success. It is a very difficult work, and it is not performed too much. But there is Shostakovich--

I don't know if there are others. I mean, Prokofiev has written some operas, of which some of them, such as Love for Three Oranges were quite successful. War and Peace, of course, is such a monster that it is very difficult to schedule it in your repertoire season. But one doesn't know whether or not they will last, as one knows now about Verdi and Puccini--although it took fifty years until one knew that the Rigoletto, Traviata, and so on, would last--so I don't know about contemporary works.

There are works which we call opera, which I, however, would put rather into the form of music theater, which may gain, as the years pass. One is Schoenberg's Moses and Aron, for instance, which I think is a wonderful work, and successful wherever it is given. It is not an opera per se, and I would be inclined to say the same about Lear by Aribert Reimann, which I produced here and which was heard in San Francisco again in 1985. I think of those works, maybe, fifty years from now one will say, "Oh, yes. They are great works." Now, one has to stick to them.

I have tried other works, and possibly they will also have more success. I think of Gunther Schuller's The Visitation, which Hamburg brought to New York, and I did the San Francisco Opera performance with Simon Estes. I think it was rather successful. I have to say "rather." I did other works: Norman Dello Joio's Blood Moon. Well, this didn't quite go over. Maybe it was too soon; maybe Norman Dello Joio had not found a style for his writing. I think he tried to oblige too many styles and please everybody. You can't please everybody. It has to be strong, stronger, strongest somewhere, without pleasing everybody.

I did Imbrie's Angle of Repose. Well, I am sorry--it was a good performance. Everybody agreed the production was first rate. I had as my guests all the important opera directors from Europe and the United States, because the International Association of

Opera Directors was meeting here, at my invitation, at the time of the world premiere. But we couldn't put it over. Again, everybody thought the performance was very good, and the direction was good, and so on. But it wasn't convincing. I think I know why; perhaps it is too close to talk about it. But Mr. Imbrie knows where we disagree. He was, which I admired, very firm. He didn't give in anywhere. But I think if he would have listened to old practitioners, which included the conductor, stage director, and the opera director, it might have had another outcome.

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Adler: So we can only hope, and it is a matter of talent, of patience, and of good luck that we find composers who write masterworks. And it would be my hope that they would be masterworks of a different kind, because we want progress. After all, Wagner, or to go back to Mozart, Puccini and Verdi--that is not necessarily the only format for opera. I wish we would find a new format, a format that includes the kind of music America is so strong in. There are all kinds of very good musicals, which go back a hundred years, but very few American operas.

Maybe some of the operas which have been performed lately [will survive]. I think City Opera in New York has done some, and Seattle; I have done some, and I would hope, maybe even without revisions, or with revisions if the composers are alive, that eventually they will find their place in the opera repertoire.

Some 1953 Debuts: Beverly Sills and Inge Borkh

Pfaff: I want to drop back to one thing from the '53 season before we lose sight of it. There were some important debuts then. The two I particularly wanted to ask you about were a very young Beverly Sills and Inge Borkh.

Adler: Beverly [Sills] was a protégée of Merola's, and especially of Mrs. Merola. But if I remember right, she sang during that year, Donna Elvira, and she sang Die Walküre with Solti. Die Walküre was certainly not her meat. But there was Elvira, which was also not necessarily the best piece of casting.

The other one you mentioned was Inge Borkh. Inge Borkh, of course, sang Elektra, in which she excelled. To my recollection she sang also Sieglinde. These both would have been with Solti. (Of course, I had Beverly here years later, when she really was a superstar, in the roles which were right for her.) Inge Borkh sang

Fidelio with Monteux, and I think she sang also Elsa in Lohengrin, which nowadays I would not necessarily think was exactly the right opera for her.

Pfaff: I would have thought more Ortrud.

Adler: The voice was not an Ortrud voice. She was a singing actress. I don't know if it is known in the states that she was giving performances where she was singing a lot of stuff like Kurt Weill wrote, more chanson-like things, and was very successful. That goes back about ten years, or less.

Pfaff: In Europe?

Adler: Yes. She also talked sometimes about going into legitimate theater when the voice left. She was a wild singer. She was highly emotional, enormously talented--very strong and very stubborn. I remember she wanted to wear a costume in [The] Flying Dutchman. I came back very late for the first performance--I don't remember where I was--but I couldn't talk her out of this costume. She didn't look very good, and she didn't understand the mentality of the American public. They didn't help her success. She still had success, but she would have had a much better success if she would have accepted to wear the costumes we wanted her to wear. She was more stubborn than I!

We were very good friends, and still are. She had a friend, a singer, with her, and he didn't help the situation, I remember.

Pfaff: She was a tall, statuesque woman, was she not?

Adler: Very tall, a big woman. I remember especially [laughing] I conducted a concert in the Hollywood Bowl with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, where she was the featured soprano. And she wanted to sing something in English. She sang the monologue from The Consul, "Papers, Papers."

Well, her English was atrocious. Nobody could understand a word, and some people were rude enough to laugh a little. But I admired her intention to do something in English. Of course she sang the final scene of Salome, that was the big thing. She sang Salome here, too.

That was one of the cases where if she would not have traveled as much as she finally did, I think it would have been better for her voice. She was one of the great talents of those days. And of course Beverly, in the lyric-coloratura field, also had great talent--a very intelligent lady, who is finding her way now as director of City Opera. She has learned that in some ways it is

easier to be a superstar than to run an opera company. We have talked about this.

Pfaff: Do you think she was too young when she was singing here in '53?

Adler: I didn't think it made any sense to let her sing a Valkyrie. And for Elvira, she may have been young. You know, Don Giovanni sopranos are a strange arrangement. Actually, she might have been a better Donna Anna than Elvira, because in the ensembles, the top voice is Donna Anna, then comes Elvira, and Zerlina is the lower voice. That's why nowadays you frequently have a mezzo-soprano cast as Zerlina. But I think Beverly might have been a very good Donna Anna.

It should be remembered that I talked Licia Albanese, one year, into singing Donna Anna. She didn't want to do it, and she thought I was crazy. But I got her to do it, and I think she was very good. It was perhaps a little late in her career, but she was very, very good. And that strengthened my opinion that the casting of Donna Anna, Donna Elvira, and Zerlina has to be done with great care, and according to the individual voices you have available.

Who conducted the Don Giovanni in '53?

Pfaff: It was Serafin, according to Bloomfield.

Adler: Don Giovanni?

Pfaff: That's what it says.

Adler: I thought Serafin conducted--

Pfaff: He did Ballo [Un Ballo in Maschera] that year, too.

Adler: Was he here twice?

Pfaff: Well, this is all the same season.

Adler: Well, excuse me, but--

Pfaff: Oh, here's--Sills was also in Elektra with Solti.

Adler: Yes, one of the maids. There she was, at the very beginning.

But that is very interesting. You know, in my recollection, I thought that Serafin had conducted Werther, Boris [Godunov], and The Barber of Seville.

Pfaff: Well, you're right in all of those.

Adler: But he conducted six operas? No.

Pfaff: Well, we have him with Werther, Boris, The Barber [of Seville], Ballo, and then--it was just one performance--of Don Giovanni.

Adler: Oh. Did Beecham conduct before? Who was in the cast? I don't remember.

Pfaff: Ellen Faull, and--

Adler: Let me see here [takes book]. Faull, Sills, and Gibson. This is not the Giovanni I remember.

You know, that was one of those things. Merola sometimes scheduled one performance of a work, and this is naturally not possible. They did a Wednesday evening series Don Giovanni. [Continuing to read] and Ballo with Grob-Prandl. Can you, without going astray, can we find-- Yes, he conducted Werther.

Pfaff: Serafin?

Adler: Yes. And he conducted Boris. When was Beecham here?

Remembering the 1943 Season

Pfaff: There's an index of conductors in the back, here--

Adler: It would interest me. Because we had problems with Beecham. He conducted Giovanni here, and he conducted Carmen, to my recollection. Was it in '57, perhaps?

Pfaff: Forty-three was the Giovanni.

Adler: Oh, forty-three. So ten years earlier.

Pfaff: And the Carmen, you're right.

Adler: Beecham had heard that Kurt Adler was the new chorus director of the Metropolitan, and he said to me, "I'll see you in the fall, in New York." And I said, "No, Maestro, you don't."

He said, "But I was told that Kurt Adler is the new--"

I said, "Sir Thomas, you are absolutely right. But I am staying here." And it was, indeed, very shortly after I had arrived here in '43--now it comes back to me--they had offered me to go to the Met. I was offered the first time in 1940, and again in '43, and then again four years later, as chorus director. In the meantime, Kurt Adler, my namesake, came.

But Merola said to me, "Leesten to me, Ha-de-ler." (You'll have to spell it H-A-D-E-L-E-R, that's the way he pronounced it.) "Leesten to me, HA-de-ler, you don't-a want-a to leave me after one season!" And I said, "No, Maestro"--I was already very devoted to him--and so I stayed.

But Beecham had heard this. I remember that he had terrible problems with the casts. Who sang this Carmen? There was a Mexican soprano singing Micaela. Beecham was following the metronome--which I don't think was Bizet's metronome--and he was so slow. It was Gonzales, and she just couldn't sustain the tempo. And who sang in Giovanni? They had terrible problems.

Pfaff: Well, Albanese was Zerlina, and Milanov was Anna, and Kirk, whom I don't know.

Adler: Florence Kirk, sure. Florence Kirk was one of the first American singers whom one really used. She sang The Girl of the Golden West here.

Pfaff: [Confirming in book] same season.

Adler: Forty-three. And the opening that year was Samson?

Pfaff: Yes.

Adler: With Thorborg. The Girl of the Golden West was conducted by Cleva. It was in English, and a translation by Alexander Fried. And Cleva was trying to show the singers how to express the Puccini line. And it ended up where all, including the American singers like Florence Kirk and Freddy Jagel, who sang Johnson--they all were suddenly singing with Italian accents. [laughs]

One I remember especially. I forget now which of the [character] has to say, "I want-a to go home-a to my maather." That was exactly the way Cleva showed the guy. I think it was in the first scene, in the very beginning of the opera. It was unbelievable; a grave mistake to do it in English. It didn't work.

I did it later with Corelli and Kirsten, and it worked much better.

Pfaff: It's too close to California, I think, to hear it in English.

Adler: I think only the line, "Whiskey." You know, when they ask for whiskey? "Whiskey per tutti." That brought a laugh. And then "Wells Fargo."

Dorothy Kirsten and Troilus and Cressida: 1955

Adler: One year the Opera Guild arranged a publicity trip to Carson City with Dorothy Kirsten. We flew to Reno, ladies of the guild, Kirsten, and I don't know who else was there. We had to change to a bus in Reno, and while we waited for the bus, I won three jackpots. Coming back from Reno by bus, we had to wait for the plane in Reno, and I again won three jackpots. And the ladies of the guild were completely startled, and they said, "But tell me, how do you do it? How do you do this?" And I said, "Ladies, do you think Mr. Miller" --who was the president of the opera-- "would entrust the San Francisco Opera to me if I wouldn't be a successful gambler?" I never again won--oh, actually I was sometimes lucky, you know, on trips and so.

But anyhow, Dorothy Kirsten, who sang many Butterflies here, also with me she sang Mimi, she sang Tosca, she sang Flora in The Love of Three Kings, she sang Manon, but she sang also La Fanciulla del West. She sang also with me--and this is an interesting thing--one of the first contemporary operas I did. It was Troilus and Cressida, by William Walton [1955]. And it was a very successful evening. Richard Lewis made his debut as Troilus, and at that time he was a beautiful looking young man. Unfortunately Kirsten never learned the role very well. Leinsdorf was conducting, and the two had difficulties. And Bob Weede was in it, and [Giorgio] Tozzi. You see, there you have four artists who, in my tenure, became very important singers. Richard Lewis, of course, was British, but Kirsten, Weede, and Tozzi were American. That was the start of American singers.

Pfaff: Tozzi was American too?

Adler: Yes, of Italian origin. But you see, years later people were asking, "Are we going to have Troilus again?" It stuck in the memory of the people. Now there is one thing I am asking myself. You see, frequently, when we do new works, we can use also lesser-known singers. Now I am not sure that the success of Troilus wasn't based on the fact that Kirsten, Lewis, Weede, and Tozzi were in it.

Pfaff: Were they all known at the time?

Adler: Oh, Kirsten was. Lewis was new, but he was an immediate success because he was very, very good. And of course Tozzi was already better known. And there was one other tenor. He was not of the same rank, but he was very good. I forget now the name. I think he had sung the same role at City Opera, because City Opera did Troilus too.

Pfaff: But you were the first after Covent Garden, weren't you?

Adler: I'm not sure if the City Opera didn't do it just before us. I think they did.¹

Pfaff: What prompted you to do it? Had you seen it at Covent Garden?

Adler: No. But I had the score, and I knew Walton. You know why I didn't do it anymore? That is another thing to mention, perhaps. We had spent very little money on the production, and I was convinced that since the importance of productions improved during my years, that if I would take this production out of the warehouse, it would simply not satisfy the audience. It was too primitive--or not primitive, too shabby. I had done such things in the earlier days. I had to learn it also.

I remember I did a production of the Marriage of Figaro, designed by Leni Bauer-Ecsy, who was a designer I used very often, very gladly, and very successfully. And Leni had designed a very nice production. Elegant. But we didn't have the money, and instead of trying to raise the money those days--I didn't know I could do it at that time--I asked to cut the production. And so the production was simplified, and a lot of the beauty and elegance was taken out.

Later on, when I learned how to raise money and had to swallow and do so if I needed it, I raised more money and I did not cut out that much anymore. But I am afraid the fact that we did not have enough money ruined the Figaro. We were stuck with this production for years to come. It has to be a stylish production, and I made it a shabby production.

Pfaff: I remember reading that Walton was in the house for the Troilus.

Adler: Yes, he was here. And not so long after that La Scala did Troilus and Cressida. I remember Walton was very unhappy with the performance at La Scala. I was there for the performance, and he

¹San Francisco was first.

said the San Francisco one was much better. I was very proud; I was young in the business as director at that time, and so I was very happy when Walton told me that.

Pfaff: In which house was it that Schwarzkopf sang Cressida? That was at Covent Garden, wasn't it?

Adler: I don't know if she sang it. She made only the recording. She made excerpts from Troilus, but was it the whole opera? I'm not sure that she sang the performance.

Actually, I think that Cressida--I would have to look at the score again--was too long for Elisabeth. On the record, of course, she could sing it. But I don't know if it was really her role.

V REMEMBERING THE 1950s

[Interview 5: February 8, 1985] ###

Season Planning

Pfaff: How did you go about putting together seasons at that point? Were you already going to Europe before each season to hear new singers?

Adler: Yes. I think I went the first time in 1955. Which is an amusing anecdote, because I was in New York and [Victor] De Sabata, who was at La Scala at that time, had invited me to the opening of La Scala. I intended to fly from New York to Paris, and from Paris to Milan. The first thing that happened was that there was a snowstorm in New York, and planes didn't leave. Finally Pan American called me at the hotel, and said, "If you have a way to get to the airport, we will fly one plane to Paris, and you surely are welcome."

So we got to the airport, and we got one of those double-decker cabins. We were already over the Atlantic when we heard that there was, as frequently happens, a strike at the Paris airport. The pilot said we had to go to Brussels.

So we went to Brussels and had to stay overnight in Brussels because the plane to Milan, which was standing next to us while we were landing in Brussels, wouldn't take us.

The next morning we had to take one of those tiny, tiny planes to Amsterdam. At the airport there, I ate the best breakfast, probably, I ate in my entire life. From there we headed for Milan, but when we came to Zurich, the weather was so bad the pilot said we couldn't land in Milan and we landed in Zurich instead. We had to take a train from Zurich to Milan, which brought us to Milan at about one o'clock in the morning, finally. It took us from, I

guess, about eight-thirty in the morning in Brussels until one a.m. the next morning.

We went to bed, and sure enough I had hardly fallen asleep when the telephone rang. It was De Sabata. He said, "Where are you?!" And I said, "That's what I would like to know." Anyhow, it was very friendly and cheerful.

The next night we went to the opening, which was Norma, with Callas. And I believe it was Simionato and Del Monaco. Callas had always some problems in the highest register, and although the Milan people adored her at that time, they booed her. It was the first time I heard Callas.

Pfaff: And they booed her that night?

Adler: Yes. Anyhow, I traveled in Europe then, and I think we have talked about the cities which were at that time the main opera cities. I knew most of the singers, conductors, and stage directors before I engaged them. I didn't like to engage people without knowing them, of course, and one did not engage people four years in advance then. Two years, frequently, and certainly one year. One hoped that their condition, meaning their vocal condition and their artistic condition, wouldn't change during those two years.

Two 1954 Debuts: Hans Hotter and Mado Robin

Adler: I wanted to talk about Hans Hotter. Hotter came to San Francisco the first time to sing three roles in 1954. One was the Flying Dutchman, for which he was as famous as for his Wotan. It was one of his incredible portrayals. He sang also the Count in Figaro, which showed his versatility. And another famous role [was] Pizarro in Fidelio. That was the same Fidelio that Pierre Monteux conducted, and Inge Borkh was Leonore.

Since his start here, a very close relationship has connected me with Hans Hotter. We understood each other extremely well. When he was here for--I don't know now, was it my anniversary or my farewell, but anyhow I had lots of artist friends here for some occasion--he brought me some sketches from Munich, the city of Munich, which I adore. I found that very kind, not only that he came, but that he brought me a present.

Hotter at this point is not only teaching, but he is singing, mainly in Vienna, certain roles. He sang recently Dr. Schoen in Vienna's production of Lulu, and there was something else. And of

course the Viennese are very conservative, and they adored Hotter, so they really celebrated his return.

Pfaff: Had he taken some time off from public appearances?

Adler: Oh yes, he had not been seen for a while. That's what I mean, when he was teaching. I think he sang some recitals, and I remember reading--I never attended the recital, but--reading about the recital in Vienna, where they thought it was extremely successful, a very good recital. Some singers--opera singers--are not necessarily the best recitalists, as we well know.

Pfaff: Yes, but he's an exceptional lieder singer.

Adler: Oh, he is such an enormous talent. So intelligent. But I was delighted to hear that they wrote in the Vienna papers that his voice was in good shape.

Pfaff: Had you heard him perform in Europe before you ever came to the United States?

Adler: No, no. I came in '38. I don't know when Hotter started, but I had not heard him then. I heard him after the war.

Pfaff: Do you remember, did you first hear him as Dutchman, or as Wotan?

Adler: I don't recall. I think it was Dutchman. His Wotan was incredible. And of course, he had the advantage of this imposing figure of his, a tall and splendid looking man. He was a better actor than almost any opera singer I remember.

He had a close relationship with Wieland Wagner, and I must say, most of the singers who worked with Wieland became great acting singers--or singing actors, if you so wish.

Pfaff: He isn't associated with Mozart roles in the public mind, I don't think. How was he in Figaro?

Adler: Very good. I think that his voice was, perhaps, a little heavy, but he was very skillful and managed the Count very, very well. But he had such roles which are unforgettable: a short role, the Inquisitor in Don Carlo, for instance. If you heard Hotter, you really had to go far to find another Inquisitor with that impact. He was tremendous.

We had no good production of Don Carlo here, unfortunately. I always hesitated. We borrowed, and then I think we were given the production from San Antonio, and it wasn't really a very good production. And that is an opera where I really desired to have a

first-rate production. We had a production, but it was never quite what I hoped. I was too stingy to spend enough money, and Don Carlo needs extremely expensive scenery and costumes.

Pfaff: And what about the score?

Adler: Well, I tell you, I liked the score which I heard first in Vienna. It was an interesting version arranged by Clemens Krauss, the conductor and director of the opera, and Lothar Wallerstein, the director.

It started in the study of Don Carlo, and not in Fontainebleau (as so many other versions start). He sat at his desk, at night, and fell asleep. It started with his aria. And in a dream was the encounter with Elisabeth that took place in a painting that was hanging in his study. In the course of the act, Don Carlo, who was sitting in the chair, actually appeared in the painting. The painting disappeared, and it was Elisabeth and Don Carlo who met. Then they sang the famous duet; it was really beautiful. The chorus was mainly backstage.

I kind of liked this version. You know, there are so many versions of Don Carlo, and we did also various versions. But I think that the French version probably--I mean, to leave out Fontainebleau is wrong, in my opinion.

Pfaff: One other debut that season that we should talk about is Mado Robin's appearance on opening night.

Adler: Mado Robin was famous for her incredible heights, meaning pitches--up there where nobody else sang. She came, and actually I was surprised. I had not heard her, but she was highly recommended by friends in Paris, and she was much more than a vocal acrobat. She really tried to put some expression in. But her forte were those high notes.

Maestro Cleva, who was to conduct the opening performance of Rigoletto, refused to conduct if she took those interpolated high notes. Now, he had a point, and she had a point. When you have a Mado Robin, you probably have to let her sing those things. Cleva should have said, "I don't want to conduct for Adler if he asked me to do such things." Well, I had asked Karl Kritz to conduct the opening of Rigoletto--which was the opening of my first independent season. And lo and behold, Kritz was in his dressing room when Cleva walks in in his tails, ready to conduct. So he did.

The press was, as far as I remember, not favorable to Miss Robin. The public was mixed. It was one of those things. Perhaps

at a later time I would not have engaged her, but as long as I engaged her, one had to show her where she was strongest, I think.

Pfaff: How was the rest of the performance? I've heard recordings where, apart from the very high notes, she seems to be a sensitive musician.

Adler: Very sensitive musician, that's what I said. She wasn't only an acrobat. But Cleve didn't want to recognize it. Also, naturally, his refusal to let her sing where she was so good irritated her terribly. She was awfully nervous with him. I think she would have sung much better with another conductor. But that really you cannot do. If Cleve says, "All right, I do it," then you have to let him do it.

Pfaff: Did she take interpolated high notes throughout the run, or was it just on the opening night?

Adler: No, no. Always.

Fund-Raising: The 1955 Public Campaign

Pfaff: One of the things that Mr. Bloomfield writes about in the opera history [Fifty Years of the San Francisco Opera] is that at the beginning of the '55 season, there was the first public fund campaign.

Adler: That I don't recall. I'm very sorry. Because those days, I had not shown yet that I was able to raise money, and so others were raising the money. I just let them raise it, and it was only later, when I felt I needed more money than I got, that I started to try my own luck. Unfortunately it was good luck, so I raised more and more, and nobody else did. And that, as I told you before, was one of the main reasons why I resigned from my position at the San Francisco Opera. I just didn't want to have to raise money.

Pfaff: Do you remember the first time you decided you wanted a production of something, and went out and got the money? When did that begin?

Adler: I don't remember, but I really had only one case where I remember I was refused a production, and that was a production which I really should have gotten--or at least the money, because it was someone who had pledged a large amount of money one season. Then I couldn't do the new production, because I didn't have the cast, or the time. Anyhow, I was green at that time, and I didn't take the

money and invest it, but I said, "Keep the money and give it to me when I need it. I don't want to take advantage of you." Well, when I needed the money, this gentleman said to me, "I lost it on the stock market," and never gave it to me.

So that was one of my bad mistakes. And I learned it. When someone had pledged money, I took it. But there I wanted to be decent, and thought, "Well, he will give me the interest, and maybe he can invest it better than I can."

Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Walter Legge

Pfaff: Did you give Elisabeth Schwarzkopf her American debut in 1955?

Adler: No, she sang recitals here--but I gave her her opera debut. It was a strange coincidence. I was in Palm Springs after a Los Angeles season, trying to get a couple of days of sunshine and rest, and [Mrs.] Chandler called a meeting of the board in Los Angeles. I had to come in from Palm Springs for this meeting, which didn't make me very happy.

But then I heard that Schwarzkopf was giving a recital that night. It was a closed recital, out in Westwood at UCLA. But they let me in, of course, and I listened to the recital. It wasn't a very good recital. She was not in good form that night, because she had sung another recital that night, before, in Santa Barbara, and wasn't quite well. So it wasn't a very glorious evening, but I knew who she was, of course, and what she could do.

So I went backstage and introduced myself. I asked her if she wanted to sing opera in the United States. She said, "Sure, but it depends, of course, on what you offer me." I said, "How about the Marschallin in Der Rosenkavalier and Donna Elvira in Don Giovanni?

She said, "Oh, that interests me. Do you want Karajan?" I said, "No thank you, Karajan is a friend of mine, but when I want Schwarzkopf, I don't want Schwarzkopf and Karajan. I am happy if I get Schwarzkopf."

Well, Elisabeth phoned her husband in Europe that night, and said, "I want to go to San Francisco. Is it okay?" He said okay. I came to New York a few days later, and Schwarzkopf's agent, who I didn't even know at that time, called me, and said, "I understand you have engaged Schwarzkopf." So I said, "Oh, I'm glad to hear it."

So Schwarzkopf really came, of course, with enormous success, and became very popular in San Francisco. She was very faithful. There were a couple of years when her husband, Walter Legge, wouldn't let her come. There was a very strange incident. In the house of friends, Walter Legge played a recording he had made of Schwarzkopf, the Elsa-Ortrud duet from the second act of Lohengrin. I wasn't very happy, and I asked him why did she have to sing Elsa. I didn't think that was quite what she should do--which I'm not sure was right, but it just seemed to me not a very good recording. I thought so highly of Elisabeth that I ventured to ask this question, because Legge and I really got along extremely well at all times. I had him often sit next to me in rehearsals, and we talked about what we heard and saw, and we almost always agreed. I thought highly of him, and he thought highly of me.

That night, he took it wrong and was furious about my remark about Schwarzkopf singing Elsa. And he said, "Well, if Elisabeth isn't good enough on the recording, she isn't good enough for San Francisco, and she won't come here anymore."

And indeed, several seasons--not many, but several seasons--she didn't come, and he refused all my offers until she told him that she wanted to come back. And then, to my recollection, she came every year.

Pfaff: Was the recital the first time you actually heard her live?

Adler: Yes, it was.

Pfaff: Did they almost always travel together? Was he almost always here when she was?

Adler: Yes, he was really her artistic mentor, through and through. She thinks that she owes him her career. He was a very, very good artistic advisor. He had impeccable ears; his hearing was fabulous --intonation and whatnot, his taste was excellent; a very bright man, with vast knowledge.

As I learned, he wasn't always the most pleasant man. But I must say that except for that one night (with the following couple of years), he was incredibly nice with me.

Pfaff: When you went to hire her for subsequent seasons, did you go through her or through him?

Adler: Through the agent. As a matter of fact, one time there was some talk of her leaving that agent. It was I who suggested to her she shouldn't change agents.

You see, those are ties with some great people which continue whether you see them or don't see them. I mentioned Karajan, with whom I went to the Music Academy in Vienna in the mid-twenties. Our friendship still continues. Schwarzkopf, whom I met later; Jess Thomas, whom I met later; Hotter--all those people. And later on there were people like Leontyne Price, or Bob Weede. So I met artists who really became terribly close to me.

Otmar Suitner. Suitner is a very strange case. He was a conductor who pleased San Francisco audiences and press very much and didn't have the same success in other theaters. But here he really did a wonderful job. I remember when a colleague of mine who attended the rehearsal--I think it was a Ring rehearsal--said to me, "How did you make a conductor out of Suitner?"

I said, "It is not how you make a conductor out of someone. He is a conductor. But to bring out the artistic talent is the duty and the skill of an opera director, I believe." That is true, and when you are able to bring the best out, you develop also a friendship with the artist. And then they will go through thick and thin for you.

I think I told you the story of Rysanek. It's a famous story about the debut night of Nilsson in America. Rysanek was sick, but for me, she sang. Such things you find frequently. Pavarotti sang a performance of Lucia where he was really sick. He couldn't manage the last act very well, but he didn't stop. He went on, because he knew that the public and I loved him, and would rather hear him in bad shape--though he sang carefully, and went through it.

Pfaff: How do you think you drew out Suitner? What was it that you appealed to in him?

Adler: Personal contact. I made jokes, which prompted him to be in a good mood when he went to the stand, you know. But you don't always know how. It is at the moment that you have to have it in your fingertips what will do it for that night.

The same thing with Leopold Ludwig, a conductor who was very successful here. I recall performances of Wagner, or the first Frau ohne Schatten here, or Wozzeck. He was very, very strong and good, and he didn't have success in many theaters. Incidentally, he was one of the conductors where there were questions about his technique. But not about his musicianship, and his expression. He had an incredible warmth. I had known Leopold Ludwig since his days at the University. We lost each other, and in the meantime he became very well known with the Vienna Opera, Berlin Opera, and Hamburg. I engaged him when he was the head of the Hamburg Opera.

Pfaff: I wanted to ask you a little bit more about working with Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Walter Legge. They had reputations for being perfectionists, and so do you.

Adler: They surely are. I had no problems with her. I could discuss with her whatever I felt I should discuss, artistically. When I conducted--and I remember with great joy having done both Marriage of Figaro and Così fan tutte with her--we got along very well.

The only thing, one year--if I'm not mistaken, it was the second season I did Figaro with her--she came from Salzburg. She had interpolated all kinds of cadenzas in the role of the Countess. And I said, "Elisabeth, what on earth is that?" And she told me that she and Karajan found an old edition of the Figaro score in Salzburg, where those cadenzas, seemingly, were introduced by Mozart, and written into the scores. And I said, "Elisabeth, I love you, but I don't believe that." We compromised: she sang some. At that time it was not the thing to do, to interpolate cadenzas in Mozart scores. It had been, indeed, the rule, and is much more now than it was some twenty years ago.

I personally don't like it too much. Of course, I come from a school in Vienna where, at that time, one just didn't. We were not allowed to do such things, not even appoggiaturas were permissible in Mozart. That's the way I learned it. I like to change. I think that if you are not flexible, you are wrong. Because, as I said once before, there are many ways to reach your artistic goals. But that I didn't like, and I think it was more or less a matter of taste.

Pfaff: Was she decorating the repeated sections of the arias?

Adler: Wherever. Wherever there was a fermata came a cadenza.

I remember one performance of Marriage of Figaro I conducted in San Diego--

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Adler: --with Schwarzkopf as the Countess. In the second finale, the lights went out in the pit. She saw it, and it was very amusing, because she tried to make the people in the wings understand that the lights went out in the pit. But the orchestra continued. We finished the act. It was already in the later part of the finale, and there was a lot of light on the stage. Since the pit was not very low, we had enough light from the stage, and finished very well. But she was nervous, and tried to get the attention of the people in the wings.

Pfaff: What was it that made her Marschallin so special?

Adler: It was both her singing and her interpretation. I will never forget her exit in the last scene, when she had her hands behind her back to be kissed by Octavian. The way she did this was wonderful. I've seen others do it, and it doesn't work. The way she pronounced certain sentences. When she pronounced Hofmannsthal's text one understood what poetry there was in this text. It was a total thing. It was really wonderful.

There were perhaps other roles where she was still very, very good, but it was not like the Marschallin or the Mozart Fiordiligi and Countess.

Teresa Berganza and a *Così fan tutte* in Naples: 1958

Pfaff: Now when you did *Così fan tutte* in 1956, was that an American premiere?

Adler: No, but San Francisco had not had *Così fan tutte* before I introduced it. I introduced it here, and introduced it in Naples in '58. Although, as we know, in *Così fan tutte* the location is Naples, it had never been performed there before I did it at the San Carlos in Naples.

That was Teresa Berganza's opera debut as Dorabella. You see, again, with Teresa I have had a friendship since we did this *Così fan tutte* in Naples. She called me the other day; she had sung the night before a role she had sung with me, and she said she had to call to tell me how badly she missed me in that performance. It was terribly sweet. But we understand each other. Also, when I traveled in Europe, she was traveling a great deal because she gave recitals always, all over Europe. We often happened to be in the same city, and I heard her recitals, and it was always a great joy. Those are the things which I remember with great gratitude; friendships with special people.

Pfaff: This *Così* in Naples in '58, was that a case where you were both hired by someone else, and you met during the production?

Adler: Oh yes. The Intendant in Naples engaged me to conduct. You see, we had done *Così fan tutte* here, and it was very successful. He engaged also Paul Hager to stage it. Fiordiligi was Stich-Randall, an American. A very well-known Italian soprano, Noni, was Despina.

Oncina was the tenor, Capecchi was Guglielmo, and Alvary was Don Alfonso.

The orchestra didn't like it. Not only that Così fan tutte wasn't the meat of the Italian musicians, but the concertmaster was an Hungarian. He was a real gypsy, and he tried to play Mozart like gypsy music, which obviously I had to stop. I didn't like that. But he was a very good violinist. Not everybody can play everything. He had a beautiful tone, stupendous technique; but the Mozart score was just not his meat.

Pfaff: How did it go when you introduced Così here?

Adler: Here, people liked it very much. Schwarzkopf was superlative. I have given Così fan tutte several times, and in different productions. The last production was a Ponnelle production which I liked very much. It was not one of his crazy productions, but it was very charming and beautiful.

Pfaff: Why do you think it was that Così was so late in catching on in the twentieth century? It seems to be the last one of the great operas to be picked up.

Adler: More than in any other Mozart opera, you need a superlative, excellent cast. I mean, there are six roles only, and a very small chorus which appears only twice. The demands are very, very high.

I regret to say that another Mozart opera which in the United States very rarely has success is the Abduction from the Seraglio. That is one I tried only in the smaller house, in the Curran Theatre, in the spring, because I was afraid that it wouldn't go very well in the big opera house. And I was also afraid of the investment, which naturally in the Curran was much smaller than it would have been in the War Memorial Opera House.

So, I tried it there. But it wasn't a real success. You know, I don't know why. I remember one of the last operas Bruno Walter conducted at the Met was Seraglio. Even with Bruno Walter, the Mozart conductor, it was not necessarily successful.

Pfaff: Do you think there's something about the content of Così that made it not--

Adler: I think it is very difficult to stage it well. It is six people for three and a half hours. Six characters in search of an opera. By the way, you know the Pirandello Six Characters in Search of an Author? There is a Hugo Weisgall, who wrote an opera on this. I was toying with it for spring. I had the feeling that it was the type of music that may not go here. There are others who think

very highly of this opera, and other operas of Weisgall which I don't know.

I played an aria backstage in Six Characters in Search of an Author. That was the first thing, and I did it only once, in the Reinhardt theater in Vienna. At that time, I didn't even know what one did backstage. But a colleague asked me to play for him. It was the Lully aria. You were given a cue, and you played your Lully aria in G minor, and you got up and left, and had your fee for the evening. That was all. At that time I was ignorant; I was about eighteen years old or something, and had never been backstage.

Later on, I really looked at the score. Perhaps I was wrong. You know, sometimes one is wrong, and for some reason at one time you don't accept it, when later on at another time, you might. But we didn't get to it. A very short time ago we had a discussion about the Weisgall opera, and someone assured me that he thought it was excellent music.

Two 1956 American Debuts: Leonie Rysanek and Birgit Nilsson

Pfaff: Nineteen fifty-six was probably one of the most memorable seasons, in terms of the debuts. I'd like to talk about them one by one, just in terms of how you remember first encountering these singers, and what they were like in their debut seasons. The first one is Leonie Rysanek.

Adler: Oh, Leonie, of course, I knew her, and was delighted that she came here. This is again [a] close friendship. I have stayed at her house in Bavaria; I have spent time with her not only in the States, but also in Europe. When she sang in Vienna, I was also in Vienna. She is a person of the theater. Very impulsive, spontaneous, with--it was and still is--an incredible voice. She helped here very much the year Callas cancelled. She accepted to sing the Callas roles.

I think she sang Lady Macbeth; she sang Ballo, if I remember rightly, in German, and I don't know what else.

Pfaff: Turandot.

Adler: Turandot. I really liked her Sieglinde, but she sang also Fidelio here; she sang Tannhäuser repeatedly; she sang Tosca. I don't think she sang Ballo again.

Pfaff: She sang Aida.

Adler: She sang Aida, of course. As a matter of fact, the year Price made her debut, Price and Rysanek alternated. There again, it is the personal contact and the personal understanding that made it possible for me to engage people like this, who were cooperative artistically, time-wise, and fee-wise.

Pfaff: Do you remember when you first heard her in performance?

Adler: No. I heard her so often here that I don't remember the first time. Strangely enough, and I regret this very much, I never conducted a performance--not even a concert--with Rysanek. I am very sorry, because I would have loved to match her spontaneity with whatever I have to offer.

Pfaff: Did you happen to hear those famous Sentas that she sang with George London?

Adler: Wait a moment. I think I heard one.

Pfaff: The first role Rysanek sang here, actually, was the Senta, with Hotter in the same cast. What was that like?

Adler: Enormous personalities on the stage. Thinking back, now that you mention it, I should be proud that I was able to present such people together.

Pfaff: It seems it was just a tremendous season, cast after cast.

Adler: You know who has now also a wonderful voice, and with such dedication? That is Hildegard Behrens, whom I could not engage. She never really made it, although we talked about it in Europe and we understood each other very well. And the other one, whom I had here, was Eva Marton. Eva Marton is also a singer with abandon. Like Rysanek, she can give everything, and more, than she has.

Pfaff: What was involved in the negotiations to get Böhm here to do Frau with Rysanek? Was she working on it too?

Adler: I really don't know what she told Böhm. I have known Böhm for a long time. I know that Rysanek talked about it; I know that my son talked about it, because he was assisting Goetz Friedrich when Böhm conducted the last new production of Fidelio in Munich. From what I heard, my son was the one who really made his work at the Munich opera pleasant for him, and he liked my son very much. So he certainly told him, and I was at this Fidelio dress rehearsal in Munich.

We have a mutual friend, a lady who lives in Santa Barbara, who is a close friend of the Böhm family, and also was a friend of the Adler family. She wanted very badly to have Böhm conduct in San Francisco, so she sponsored, actually, the new Frau ohne Schatten.

Pfaff: And that is a Lehnhoff production, is that correct?

Adler: It is. And that he did very well.

Pfaff: Did he model that after the Paris production? I've seen pictures of the Paris, and they look similar.

Adler: I think the Paris was later. They may have modeled the Paris production after the San Francisco production. I think he did this very well. He has a very good memory, and he knows his scores; he knows what he wants. I cannot always agree with him, but he knows what he wants at least.

Pfaff: How would you describe the course of Rysanek's career over the time that you worked with her? I know she had a difficult period, and then she seemed to come out of it so splendidly.

Adler: Well, that happens with singers, for some reason. There may be reasons that they sing too much; there may be reasons of bad luck, singing the wrong roles for a while, or whatnot. And then they get out of it. And especially if they are very sincere to themselves. If they fool themselves about what they are doing, and don't want to think clearly (or cannot think clearly), and say, "Well, I need that, and that, and that," then it makes it worse.

Pfaff: You seem to have been very wise in using her for the Italian repertoire as well as in the heavy Wagner/Strauss things. I know she talked about needing those roles to keep the legato.

Adler: The way Rysanek sings Italian opera is not necessarily the way the Italians do Italian opera. But she is so strong in it that she convinces her public. I mean, her Tosca. You can imagine that there are people who say, "Is this necessary, to do it with such intensity?", you know. When she does it, there it is. Certainly with the Strauss operas she did it too. Chrysothemis was one of her best roles, which she sang repeatedly here in Elektra, and the Empress in Die Frau ohne Schatten.

The first time I did Frau ohne Schatten, she was sick and cancelled. But then she sang it the next time and every time I did Frau ohne Schatten. And she sang Marschallin here, I think. She

sings also Ariadne, which is not one of her best roles, somehow. Of course, her Elisabeth in Tannhäuser is just incredible.

Pfaff: I'll never forget when she made that return to the opera house in that role. When she finished "Dich teure Halle," I thought the house was going to come down.

Adler: And rightly so. Her voice had a glory at that time which was equal to her intensity. She sang Tannhäuser, and she sang Forza del Destino. I remember in Tannhäuser, in one performance, the curtain didn't go up. I think it was in San Diego. She was singing Tannhäuser and the curtain didn't go up. And she said to me, "Is the curtain never going to go up anymore when I sing in your house?"

But she is very musical. When she had some problems, it was frequently that she overdid. She just couldn't control the strength of her emotions, and of her vocal performance. But she has learned to do this. From what I read, she is singing again. She said she would not sing anymore, but she has recently sung Frau ohne Schatten in Vienna. It was a great success.

Pfaff: Have you heard her Kundry, anywhere?

Adler: Yes, I heard her Kundry in Bayreuth. Yes and no. I hope I can be sincere about what I hear, even if I am a great admirer and friend of an artist, but I want to try to be objective. It hurts more when something is not exactly the best I think it should be, but it's a fact.

Pfaff: Andrew Porter wrote about it in The New Yorker, saying that it was vocally uneven, but one of the most spellbinding impersonations--

Adler: Absolutely. I was talking about how she was using her voice. I was one who talked to her about singing Ortrud for years, and I think she sang it here. I knew her voice very well, and I had the feeling that I would be able to work with her on Ortrud, but I didn't have the opportunity.

You know, the best Ortrud I remember in my life was actually by Astrid Varnay. She was also a dramatic soprano. As a child, I heard Anna Bahr-Mildenberg [as] Ortrud. She was the dramatic mezzo of the days of Mahler. I'm talking about 1915, if you please; it was the first time I heard Lohengrin. Seventy years ago, believe it or not! I was ten years old.

I remember many dramatic sopranos who sang Ortrud, and I'm sure she can do it.

Pfaff: One of the things that amazes me is that you got Nilsson to make her debut in the same performance with Rysanek as Sieglinde, in Walküre. Tell, if you will, the story of that night.

Adler: Why would you think that Nilsson wouldn't have made a debut in the Walküre in which Rysanek sings?

Pfaff: No, just the idea of having those two stunning talents on the same stage--

Adler: Well, that's what one aims for. But Birgit [Nilsson] made her debut in the Walküre performance, and that morning Rysanek called me and said, "I am sorry, I have no voice; I don't think I can sing tonight." That was before jets, and it was about eleven, eleven-thirty. There was no way to get someone here. I said to Leonie, "You know, if you don't sing, there is no performance tonight."

She said, "I know this very well. And you know also very well that I won't let you down. In another theater I might not sing, but I'll sing for you, of course." So I thanked her, and I told my secretary that she was ill, and one would have to follow her around during the performance, giving her tea, if she wanted, or--she was drinking cognac at that time--cognac if she wanted. Just baby her.

And so it was. My secretary was behind her all the time, and I spent a lot of time backstage during that performance. And Birgit said to me, "You didn't pay any attention to me when I made my debut. You paid only attention to Sieglinde." She still is telling me this now, you know, making a joke of it. I always have to reply, "Birgit, you know very well if I wouldn't have babied Leonie"--who is a good friend of Birgit's now--"you wouldn't have made a debut that night, because we would have had to cancel the performance."

Pfaff: Do you happen to know if they had sung together up to that point?

Adler: I don't think so. I really don't know, but I don't think so.

Pfaff: I know that when Rysanek was singing the Sieglindes at Bayreuth, that was already with Varnay, and Nilsson was still to come. Do you remember when you first heard Nilsson?

Adler: No. You know, you ask me those questions and I feel that I have a poor memory, which I really don't. But I tell you what it is. When I work with someone--it's the same when I conduct--the performance of the evening is the most important one, the most beautiful one. And I forget about other evenings, and about other operas. I've been asked frequently what is my favorite opera, and

I have always answered, "The one I am just working on or conducting." And I forget other things.

I remember when Rysanek sang Frau ohne Schatten with Nilsson here, the last time we did Frau ohne Schatten.

Pfaff: Well, tell me about the debut of Birgit; how was she received?

Adler: Oh, enthusiastically!

I was also present when Flagstad made her debut in Vienna. And that was not entirely successful. Wrongly, she was accused of being an American girl as Brunnhilde--it was Walküre. That was not entirely successful, and it was a typical Viennese favorite.

The San Francisco Opera Orchestra and Chorus

Adler: About the development of the San Francisco Opera Orchestra and Chorus: I really was proud of the chorus when I had it. The chorus is now, again, very good, but it had years when it was not what it was with me.

The orchestra was the San Francisco Opera Orchestra, but a large part of the orchestra was made up of symphony musicians, because the symphony opened their seasons only after the opera season was over, since they played in the opera house. And then there were a few people who played only the opera, and freelanced after the opera season. The quality of the orchestra in recent years has really increased very, very much.

When Davies Hall was opened, the musicians of the opera orchestra had to decide whether they wanted to play opera or play symphony, because both organizations were performing simultaneously when there were two halls. Some of the musicians stayed with the opera, and others stayed with the symphony. But we had to induct many, many new musicians. I sent a committee all over the United States. I think that David Agler, my resident conductor at that time, deserves a great deal of credit. He brought musicians here. They auditioned for him, and finally they auditioned for me, and I hope we picked the best ones at that time. Really, the orchestra improved vastly.

It was my grief that the orchestra wasn't big enough for some operas. I hesitated to enlarge the pit. It took quite a bit of time to enlarge the pit for some performances, and you lost two rows of seats on the main floor, which is costly. And since I

wasn't a spendthrift, I didn't do it too often, unless it was imperative, like Frau ohne Schatten or Wagner. But now they perform with the enlarged pit at all times. I am not entirely sure that I would consider this the best solution. But so it is now, and the orchestra sounds good, and that is fine.

But when I was director, I played some operas with a smaller pit because I was too stingy to lose two rows to put more strings in. It was mainly strings; the winds were there, of course. But we also changed the seating. We were experimenting with the seating for the acoustics--I don't think we ever reached the best solution.

I like to have the woodwinds in front of me when I conduct, in the middle of the pit. You can phrase much better if you have them in front of you. But on the other hand, in most theaters they are on the side of the conductor. We tried the woodwinds to the left of the conductor, and, behind them, the French horns. In many European houses you find this, in Vienna. But here it didn't work. For some reason, you heard the French horns as if the sound originated high up above the pit. It wouldn't mix with the orchestra. We tried also the woodwinds there, on the left of the conductor, behind strings, and, to the right of the conductor, behind strings, horns, brass and percussion. That worked better.

I had a hesitation to go back to the old seating which I found when I came here, where all the winds--woodwinds and brass--were sitting to the right of the conductor. I found that in some parts of the opera house you heard a sound like the sound of a band. I, at least, felt I was less aware of the small number of string players when the woodwinds were separated from the brass, and were sitting either to the left of the conductor or in the center.

The seating of the orchestra in the pit is a very important thing, and actually also on the stage. I remember when I conducted the Shanghai Philharmonic three years ago when I was in Shanghai, I resealed them. They were sitting in a way that the brass were directly behind the woodwinds, in the center. The sound of the woodwinds was really not satisfactory. I changed it, and I put the double bass--I think I had eight double basses--in the center, and only the woodwinds in front of them. I had the brass and the French horns to my right, on stage left. It was certainly another, freer sound, and the musicians felt freer. The woodwind players explained through the interpreter that they always felt they had to play too loudly and force the tone, because the brass were behind them.

So you see that to play with the seating of orchestras is very, very important. I reseeded the orchestra also in Sydney, and I believe the results were good.

Pfaff: At what point in your taking over the company did you have to give up the chorus?

Adler: I had the chorus until I became artistic director. I changed chorus directors several times. I was very ambitious; I am always ambitious, but, for the chorus, was especially ambitious because the chorus had made great strides during the years I worked with it. And actually, I enjoyed it, and they enjoyed me. I think I mentioned that we were told that we were dominating the operations in the San Francisco Opera, and maybe it was true. Because it was a very, very good organization.

But I gave it up as soon as I became artistic director. Then I had chorus directors, and I tried Italian chorus directors; I tried American chorus directors; I tried German chorus directors. Really, until the present chorus director, Richard Bradshaw, of whom I think the world--came, I don't think that the chorus was really up to snuff. Now they are very good.

Pfaff: Why is it so hard to find a good chorus director?

Adler: First of all, a chorus director has to be an excellent musician. He has to have an excellent ear. Secondly, he has to be a great musician, but he has also to understand that, in the long run, conductors may come who will interpret the music differently from the way he prepared it with the chorus. And he must, if he wants to be a good chorus director, tell the chorus that the final version of what will be done will be only known when they have the conductor of the performance. It needs a certain flexibility. Now when I was rehearsing a chorus, I really worked with some different interpretations, different tempi, different phrasings, in order to have them ready and willing to change when the conductor came.

And then, a chorus director needs an enormous amount of patience. At the same time, he has to be able to exercise discipline, both in preparation and in behavior, and musical discipline. I think rhythmical precision is, of course, a must in the chorus. When you have eighty people, if you don't train them to cut off their tone at the same time, the misery starts already. The same is true for pick-ups, upbeats, and so forth--where you want an unwritten crescendo, the coloring of the voices, and so on.

At the same time, I think it is the duty of the chorus director to watch that nobody ruins his voice singing chorus. It is absolutely unnecessary, because if you have twenty people

singing the same line you sing, if you are careful you can actually develop your voice rather than ruin your voice.

Pfaff: When you were working as chorus director, did you ever spot voices that you wanted to make solo voices?

Adler: Yes. At the very beginning, I suggested to Maestro Merola to take Claramae Turner out of the chorus, because I thought she had a voice that could make it, and she did. Throughout the years, again and again, singers have started in the chorus. It is not the best for the chorus to have singers who aspire to careers as soloists, because they leave. And of course, when you work with a chorus, if you can keep it intact, you have better luck with the quality. But you get, perhaps, better voices when you accept people whom you know will not stay long, and plan to be soloists.

I think that singers who aspire to be soloists are afraid to join a chorus. They think they will ruin their voices. I have always discouraged this; I told them, "This is not so." As I said a moment ago, if the singer and the director are careful, you can develop voices in the chorus, without using them as much as you use them when they sing solo lines. Because if you have twenty voices sing the same line, you can watch out that you don't give too much, and don't abuse your voice.

Two 1956 Company Debuts: Leyla Gencer and Eileen Farrell

Pfaff: Another singer from the '56 season was Leyla Gencer. Am I saying her name right?

Adler: Well, it was pronounced and spelled differently in Europe and here. Didn't we spell it here G-E-N-G-E-R?

Pfaff: "C." G-E-N-C-E-R.

Adler: "C"? All right, then it was somewhere in Europe that it was spelled G-E-N-G-E-R. Leyla, "Genger" or "Gencer," came here when Tebaldi cancelled Francesca da Rimini. She cancelled very late. It was Glauco Curiel, who was at that time prompter here--he was also prompter at La Scala, and the favorite prompter of Karajan. It was he who caused the problem in Vienna when Karajan cancelled a performance once because the union wouldn't allow an Italian prompter in Vienna. But he recommended her.

Pfaff: What was his name?

Adler: Glauco Curiel. He was from Trieste. And Glauco, who was prompter here, told me of a Turkish soprano, who had all the beauty of appearance that Francesca needed, and the voice, and he thought she knew the part. So I called her, without knowing her, and I asked her if she knew Francesca. She said yes.

Now, Leyla Gencer always said yes, she knew the roles, and never did. But she was very musical and learned very fast. She was, as frequently with musicians of this kind, never quite precise, because she was always too late. And Leyla came here, and was really overwhelmingly beautiful, and sang the role of Francesca da Rimini.

Francesca da Rimini was not one of the successes here. I don't think I cast it all the way through the way it should have been cast. There was another thing: Oliviero de Fabritiis conducted it, and he was a friend of Zandonai, the composer. He took terribly slow tempi. I think that his slow tempi, besides the wrong production--we used the production that Leo Kurz devised, mostly from existing scenery--and it wasn't a real success. The people didn't know the opera at that time, our promotion was not the best, and, really, I'm not sure it is the best of all operas. But it is an effective production; of course, D'Annunzio is a great name, since the story is his.

But Gencer had a big success, and I thanked her. She helped me out on many occasions. For instance, when Callas cancelled Lucia, she learned Lucia and sang it, which I don't think was necessarily her role. She learned it in ten days here, and got away with it. That's the way to say it. But then she pushed me, frankly, more and more. I know I let her sing Manon, which I think was wrong. I let her sing Gilda, which I think was wrong. But those days, you know, you make some mistakes, and you learn from mistakes.

But she had also something. She was an interesting performer. And she was a performer who was strongest in Europe. She had a very strong following in La Scala, much more so than in the States. She sang here, and I think she sang at the Met, too, and at other theaters. But at La Scala, the people were crazy about her.

Pfaff: What were her virtues as a singer?

Adler: Her voice was basically very, very beautiful. She didn't always master it, technically, although she had stupendous pianissimi. But when she forced, and in dramatic parts she had a tendency to force, there was something--she must not have heard herself, you know? But she was a very strong performer. Sold herself this way, also. But at La Scala the reaction of the public was different

from that of the public here. But I think that the San Francisco Opera owes Leyla Gencer all kinds of great evenings, and she owes the San Francisco Opera all kinds of great opportunities. And she might admit to herself, at least, that certain opportunities she asked for were not necessarily the right ones.

Pfaff: The other singer I wanted to ask about from that season was Eileen Farrell, who made her company debut that year.

Adler: Eileen was one of the greatest voices available at that time, but she had not done very much opera. But she sang Cherubini's Medea, and I think she was very, very good. Incidentally, do you know that for our President Clark Kerr's inauguration--it was he who wanted Medea for the Greek Theatre. And that's how we inaugurated opera performances in the Greek Theatre. He asked for Medea.

Pfaff: And was that at the Greek Theatre with Farrell too?

Adler: Yes. But it was a beautiful voice. She was not necessarily a bonus to stage talent, but the beauty and intensity of her voice certainly justified her being on the stage. She was a complete opera performer in the parts which suited her.

Pfaff: Did you bring her into the roles? Had she been singing very much opera?

Adler: She never sang very much opera. She was a very amusing personality, wonderful sense of humor. And I enjoyed her being here very much.

Pfaff: Tell me more about her personally.

Adler: Oh, she just said what she thought, you know, and she was no politician. She just burst out with what she wanted to say. But she didn't want to sing too much.

Pfaff: It was in this season, I believe, that there was the famous incident of the encore "Vissi d'arte" by Tebaldi.

Renata Tebaldi

Adler: Well, that was Glauco Curiel and Tebaldi in a Sunday matinee, singing Tosca, singing the "Vissi d'arte" so magnificently that the audience really went wild--wanted a bis. But to my recollection, we had only one bis before that, and that was Tagliavini singing Nemorino in L'Elisir d'Amore, when he repeated "Una furtiva

lagrima." And it was not welcomed by the president of the opera, who said, "We mustn't have bis in this house."

Well, Glauco Curiel really didn't know what to do, so he did the "Vissi d'arte" a second time. And I'm afraid it was a mistake, because, the way it goes frequently when you have a bis, the second time wasn't as good as the first time. And I'm sure Renata [Tebaldi] regretted it as much as Curiel.

Pfaff: Do you think she wanted him to do it?

Adler: I think so. Pride--she was a very proud singer, and the public really insisted. You must not blame them. She was in great shape that afternoon.

Pfaff: And how long had she been singing for Merola before you arrived?

Adler: Since 1950.

Pfaff: So it was while you were here?

Adler: I conducted Aida with her at that time. She had agreed to sing the Countess in Marriage of Figaro, and she came here and said she didn't know it, which I have learned very recently wasn't quite true, because she had sung the Countess somewhere in Italy. But she probably didn't want to sing it, and she probably was right.

So she told Merola, and Merola was furious. But there was nothing he could do.

Pfaff: What was she like as a musician?

Adler: I think she was a good musician. You know, when you have such a voice, then you don't think about a quarter note or an eighth note or what. But she was a good musician. I am trying to think now what roles did she sing here. She sang Aida; she sang Tosca, she sang Bohème--I don't know if she sang Bohème here. You know, I've heard her in New York and in Europe so often that I don't remember now exactly where I heard what.

Pfaff: Well, she sang Madeleine in Andrea Chenier.

Adler: Oh, Madeleine was wonderful. You are right. Madeleine in Chenier was just outstanding. What else?

Pfaff: She did Forza here, too.

Adler: Did she?

Pfaff: Yes. The Forza Leonora.

Adler: I don't remember. Sorry, I conducted so many Forzas I wish I could remember. I conducted Aida with her, and I conducted the concert in the Hollywood Bowl with her, but I don't remember that she was in Forza. Mr. Bloomfield remembers; I don't.

The Tebaldi and Callas Rivalry

Pfaff: How real was this competition between Tebaldi and Callas?

Adler: Oh, it was very serious. They really were so jealous of each other, which, in my book, was completely unnecessary, because they were such different types of artists, singers, personalities, people, as women--incredible. I got along with Callas very well.

Perhaps I can state here that she wanted to make an operatic comeback, when she thought she could come back after all those years, here, in San Francisco. She came, and we had lunch together, and it was decided that I would offer her a new production of Traviata, with Zeffirelli if possible, as her comeback. Then she let me know she didn't want to do it. I think she was afraid, and perhaps she was right.

Pfaff: When was this?

Adler: I don't remember. Sorry, I'm no historian, sir. But she wasn't singing anymore at that time, you know, and certainly not opera. I remember it was in a French restaurant, "Charles." I forgot the name of the street now, near the Embarcadero Freeway. And he wasn't open for lunch, but when I told him that I had asked Callas for lunch, he let Callas and me have lunch. He cooked himself--and good it was.

And Maria said, "I don't drink," and she didn't want to drink the champagne he had prepared. But by the time the luncheon was over, she had practically finished the bottle of champagne.

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Adler: I think I was able to communicate on a very friendly basis both with Tebaldi and with Callas. The same as, later, with Pavarotti and Domingo. You can do it. It is just a matter of believing in the people, and believing in your relationship with them. I didn't find any problems in it, no contradictions. I said what I thought, and they bought it.

Maria Callas

Pfaff: When was it that you first heard Callas?

Adler: That must have been the opening of La Scala in December--would be December 7, 1955.

Pfaff: And what did you make of that performance, when you heard it?

Adler: Well, it was a great performance, only Callas, vocally, had some problems.

Pfaff: At what point did you seek to engage her for the first time?

Adler: Oh, I tried repeatedly. I remember at a party at whatever the club at the Metropolitan is called (it was at the old Met). We talked, and the next day a mutual friend of Callas's and mine called me. We were joking a lot, and the next day this lady called me, and said, "You know, I think if you want Callas you can get her to come to San Francisco on your terms."

So I called Callas and we got together and arranged for her to come. Then, before that season, I had lunch with her and Meneghini--at Biffi's at La Scala also--and I remember very clearly she hadn't sent any publicity material to San Francisco. I had asked her to send publicity material. Then she went somewhere and I went somewhere, and a couple of weeks later we met at Biffi's, and again, Meneghini still hadn't sent the material. So I said to her, "You need a new publicity agent. I think I should handle publicity for you."

Anyhow, she was in Edinburgh, where the weather is very bad, and she wrote me a letter that said that she was suffering from the bad climate. Then she cancelled, and she cancelled from Milan. She said that she was sick and couldn't come to San Francisco. I think she was supposed to open with Lucia, if I am not mistaken. I called her in Milan, and the telephone operator said to me, "You cannot talk to your party now, because she is recording at La Scala."

So when I mentioned this to the president of the opera, he was absolutely furious, and he said, "You have to sue." Well, I didn't sue her, but I brought charges against her at the American Guild of Musical Artists, the union. There was a rather unpleasant session, where I had to accuse her, and the AGMA people said that she had been wrong. If she was ill, she had enough time and she should have come to San Francisco, and she should have waited, if she couldn't recover, here--and not record in La Scala. So she got a

warning, which said that if such a thing would happen once more she would be banned from all stages in the United States.

Nevertheless, you see, again, our relationship remained a friendly one. I had to accuse her, at this meeting. I said the facts; I didn't say more, and I didn't say it spitefully or hatefully or whatnot. I just talked about the facts, and that was enough.

But I mentioned earlier that she wanted to make her comeback in San Francisco. It was years later, of course. Over the years we still, whenever we ran into each other, were polite and friendly.

Pfaff: What kind of a woman was she? How do you remember her?

Adler: Oh, incredible personality. Enormous personality: strong-minded, very intelligent. She was a fabulous musician, and, of course, she was able--when she sang something that she could handle--she could produce the most beautiful passages vocally. Although I think the real "Callas-thing" that I remember is the strength of her personality as a musician, as an actress, and as a person.

Pfaff: From what I've seen in film, she seemed to be a very controlled actress.

Adler: Oh, she was so intelligent. She knew exactly what she did. She knew exactly what she wanted to do, and could do it.

Pfaff: She has been accused by some people, who I think are wrong, of not having technique. It seemed to me she had technique to burn.

Adler: She sang everything, you know. At times, I should say, when she [performed] with Maestro Serafin, she was able to do all kinds of things she was not able to do with other conductors. But about her personality: I attended once a performance of Callas's in Chicago. It was Lucia. And in the previous Lucia performance, I had heard she had such a success that when she came for her curtain call after the Mad Scene, the first minute the entire audience--3,700 people or whatever was the Chicago capacity--were on their feet.

Well, she wanted this filmed for a magazine. So at the next Lucia performance, she had the photographer and technicians there. As it went, she wasn't in very good voice, and she didn't have that applause when she came out. Well, when she came out the second time, she made a movement--and I saw it with my own eyes--which was a movement for the audience which nobody could resist. [Claps once] The whole audience was on its feet. And she got it. She was just a phenomenon, just a phenomenon.

Pfaff: I think that people often tend to think of singers as something other than musicians. Can you tell me in a little more detail how you knew that she was a fine musician?

Adler: Well, I heard her. I know of her recordings. I mean, if someone is not a fine musician, how could they put the phrase the way she phrased, and sing the performance or make the recordings that she did? Because, again, the voice was not at all times and not in all spots, the best one. Yet she handled it very well without having a perfect technique.

Pfaff: So was the end of your negotiations to bring her here the time that you had to go to AGMA? Was that the last time you tried, or did you try to get her after that?

Adler: Well, we were in touch, and she said she was coming here and she wanted to talk to me. That's when we were talking about her comeback in Traviata.

Pfaff: Did you hear her recital here with Di Stefano when she came?

Adler: No, I wasn't here. But I remember an incident with her in New York. We were staying at the same hotel, the Stanhope on Fifth Avenue, and one day I came from lunch outside somewhere. The man at the desk said to me, "Maestro, are you going to the reception?" I said, "What reception?"

He said, "Well, in the dining room is a reception. Just go in." I went in, and there were three thrones. The thrones were: in the center was Sol Hurok, on one side was Maria Callas, on the other side was Di Stefano, and the whole press was there. That was the last time I saw Hurok and Callas. Both died. I've seen Di Stefano since. Actually, he came here for some Pavarotti performance.

Later on, another time I remember, my wife and I got the Callas suite at the Stanhope, so I slept in her bed. Slept in her bed, and I slept in the bed of Rostropovich when I was in Washington last year. He wasn't there, and the hotel he is staying in, where I was staying too at that time, gave me his suite. I told him when I saw him the next time, "Slava, I have slept in your bed, but they didn't let me use your piano."

He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, the hotel rented me your suite when you were not here, but they put a padlock on the piano." Which is true. He has a grand piano in his suite, and there was a padlock so I couldn't use it.

Leontyne Price's San Francisco Debut: 1957

Pfaff: I just wanted to ask you about one more debut at this period, because it's such an important one, particularly for you. That is Leontyne Price. How did you first meet Leontyne Price?

Adler: I had heard her on television with Peter Herman Adler, and I'd heard about her, and I sensed that this was an artist with whom I would have every possible contact. I asked her if she wanted to sing the Second Prioress in The Dialogues of the Carmelites, of which I had got the first performance in the United States, and actually outside of Italy. The world premiere was in Milan. It was at the world premiere, and after the premiere, I went with Virginia Zeani, Leyla Gencer, and Franchot Tone, to a fabulous party at the Palazzo Crespì, publishers of the Milan newspapers.

I asked Franchot Tone, "How do you think the American public would react to The Dialogues of the Carmelites?" He said, "Fabulously. Why? Do you want to give it?"

I said, "Yes, I do." He said, "When?" I said, "Twenty-sixth of September"--I don't know if the date is correct, but let's assume twenty-sixth of September.

He said, "I'll be there." I said, "Wonderful. First two tickets sold." [Laughs] He came, actually, with a party, I think, of eight or ten. He came to the premiere.

And Leontyne came. I'll never forget the rehearsals. Somehow, she was not quite used to a stage as large as ours, and she was always touching the scenery. And I was telling her, "Leontyne, don't move the scenery!" Everything was wiggling. We talked about the Harry Horner production, I think, before. It was Harry Horner who directed it. He, of course, was happy with this incredible voice, and the incredible feeling that Leontyne put into this part. That was her first major success in a major theater. She had not sung at the Metropolitan at that time. She had sung with major symphony organizations, because I remember that she was singing Aida, alternating with Rysanek--when she had to leave and sing a pension fund concert in Philadelphia with Ormandy. So she had already a certain reputation, or Ormandy recognized who Leontyne was and is.

Pfaff: Were you the one who introduced her to Karajan?

Adler: I certainly talked to Karajan about her. She sang here in the fall, and I always met Karajan on my trips, which usually started

in December. That was shortly after she had made her debut, and there's no doubt that I talked about this phenomenal singer.

She had in her dressing room for years three photographs: one of Karajan--he was the emperor. One of Bing--he was the king. And one of me--and I was the president, as she said. But when she sang, she had those three photographs in her dressing room.

Pfaff: She was still a young woman when you brought her out here. What was the voice like then?

Adler: Glorious. She had some bad habits, which every singer has. But she sang differently at that time, and the material was just abundant. Unique material, and a unique personality. I consider myself very lucky that I met her and had her as a singer, and have her as a friend, for all those years.

Pfaff: Tell me what she is like as a person?

Adler: She is a quite wonderful person, subject to moods, as any artist is. She had a period when she couldn't stand flowers, and said she got sick and never wanted flowers in her dressing room. I think it changed a little bit. But she is an artist who--the people just eat out of her hand--I have to use this phrase. The last time I heard a recital of hers was in Salzburg last summer at the festival. This international audience--they pay I don't know what for tickets at the festival, for a Price recital. It was completely sold out, but she had more success with those fancy people than she has in a normal recital, because she was so out of this world. Really, I must say that like a student I admire her.

Pfaff: At the Gala that was given for you, when she came and sang that "Zweite Brautnacht" at the end, I had never heard such a thing. That was an amazing performance.

Adler: We owe her many of those amazing performances. I have discussed with her many roles I think she could have done very well, but she didn't want to do them for one reason or the other. I'm very sorry I was unable to get her to do them. We talked often about the Marschallin. I'm not sure of this, frankly. At first she didn't want to do it. But I understand that lately she was thinking of it again, before she decided she would retire.

I think she would have sung Desdemona out of this world. But she didn't want to do it, for obvious reasons. Maybe she was right. I am very sorry she didn't. We talked for years about new roles she was studying. Have I mentioned my experience with her first Butterfly?

Pfaff: No.

Adler: I conducted her first Butterfly, which was in Los Angeles after the San Francisco season. I don't know the year. I had to call an orchestra rehearsal, of course, because she had never sung Butterfly with us. The orchestra had never had an orchestra rehearsal in Los Angeles, so they were furious. But at the end of the rehearsal--I'll never forget this--the entire orchestra was standing up and giving Leontyne an ovation, the way she has probably rarely had, because it was one of those couple of hours you don't forget.

Pfaff: How was the performance that followed?

Adler: Wonderful. I did Butterfly repeatedly with her. But nothing sticks in my memory like this rehearsal. And we did Forza together, and Trovatore. She was incredible in Forza, Trovatore, Ballo, Aida, of course.

I remember the last time when I was in charge of Aida [in 1981]. Margaret Price was singing Aida, and she arrived and wasn't well. Then came opening night, and she really wasn't in great shape, and we didn't know for sure if she would make it or not. That was the night that Leontyne Price arrived in San Francisco.

I called her to greet her, and she had already heard that Margaret wasn't well. She said, "You don't want me to sing tonight, do you?" And I said, "No."

She said, "Oh." I said, "Well, frankly--" and told her how it was. And she said, "Look, Kurt, if you need me, you know I would never let you down." After having arrived here, she waited until quarter of ten, to see whether or not I would call her at the hotel to come over and finish the performance.

And then Margaret got sicker, and she cancelled--I think it was the third performance. And that's when Leontyne sang the performance of her life. She really rehearsed--with piano of course--and she was in the greatest shape. It was wonderful; nobody forgets it. I remember Pavarotti, he was outstanding that night. It was one of those, what they call in German a Sternstunde, a star-hour, in the real sense of the word.

Pfaff: Wasn't that her first time singing Aida in a number of years, too? Hadn't she put the role aside for a while?

Adler: Many years. She didn't want to sing it again. And that performance gave her the idea that she should sing it once more. And she did.

But again, you know: people, friends. She said to me, as she had done before, when Margaret finally cancelled, "You know I wouldn't let you down."

Pfaff: Well, she certainly didn't, over all those years.

Adler: No. And we were very close. You remember she had a difficult time once, because she sang Fanciulla, which she should have never done, at the Met. I shouldn't have said it, but anyhow, she was not in good shape; everybody knows it. And we met in Rome. We had a long talk, and I believe it was I who thought she wasn't ready to come back. She came back a month later than was planned. She should have come back even later. It was our conversation in Rome; she was mentally, emotionally, not in a condition to go back to the Met. So I suggested she should wait another month. And she did.

Pfaff: How long did she take off for that period? Didn't she stop singing for a while?

Adler: I really don't remember.

But we talked about all this, as we always talked openly about her problems, about my problems. We are really very good friends, in the best sense of the word.

Pfaff: Were you breaking ground around here by hiring a black soprano at that level?

Adler: I don't like to talk about this. The feeling was, in general, very good, but some wondered if I was doing the right thing. But I did it. When I had something in mind, believed in something, I have always done it. That's why some people don't like me. But I did it, and I'm glad of it.

Pfaff: And was the reception immediately very warm for her?

Adler: Oh, sure, as sensational as you get.

VI MORE ABOUT THE 1950s AND THE 1960s

[Interview 6: March 5, 1985] ##

The Dialogues of the Carmelites: 1957

Pfaff: Let's begin by talking about how you first became aware of Dialogues of the Carmelites. Did you hear the premiere?

Adler: Yes, I did. I knew the book on which the story--the libretto--was based. I'd looked at the music and the libretto, and I was interested in it. Also Harry Horner, who finally designed and staged it, was very much interested in the work.

I had problems getting the performance rights. A lawyer in Los Angeles had the performance rights for the United States, on account of the novel. It said in his agreement that Carmelites could not be performed in English. I felt at that time the necessity of doing it in English. Finally I negotiated with this man. I should say that the publisher, which was Ricordi, and [Francis] Poulenc had given up, because they had tried, and they were unable to get the rights. That's when I started myself the battle for the rights.

I finally got the rights from this lawyer, and he said, (and that I am quoting) "Who am I to deprive the people of Los Angeles from hearing Poulenc's fabulous music?"

That he said because I had told him the plan was to bring the Carmelites to Los Angeles to Shrine Auditorium after the San Francisco season.

Well, I got the rights, and practically immediately left for Europe and went to Milan to attend the world premiere. Poulenc had not heard from the publishers yet that I had the rights, and he was completely amazed when I told him that on--I don't know the exact date, but suppose September twenty-sixth--we would do the Carmelites in San Francisco.

The Carmelites in Milan was an enormous success, and it was the first time in a long time that the public in Milan had made a success for a foreign composer--Poulenc.

Actually the public was very proud of it. I remember very well that after the world premiere, there was a supper at the Palazzo Crespi, a supper of an elegance to outshine all elegant suppers I remember. I went there with Virginia Zeani, who had sung Blanche, and escorting her was Franchot Tone and then Leyla Gencer and I. During the evening, I remember sitting with them, and I told you that I said to Tone, "Do you believe that this work would have success in the United States?"

And he said, "Of course! And when you produce it, I'll be there."

And I really notified my office that I had sold two tickets to Franchot Tone for the opening of the Carmelites. He came with a group of people, because he was so enthusiastic about what he had heard at La Scala.

I frankly think that the San Francisco performance was better, because Margherita Wallmann, who staged the world premiere (and who did quite a few stagings of the Carmelites later on--and who was an excellent stage director in some ways), made a monument out of this.

The music of Poulenc was not music which really could take such a monumental show. Horner staged it more like a play. It was on a revolving stage. I think that besides the tremendous success of Leontyne Price's debut in this, was the casting, which included Dorothy Kirsten, Blanche Thebom, Sylvia Stahlman, and I think Claramae Turner's first time as Mother Superior. It was quite a bunch of ladies.

I remember the rehearsals with great glee, because not only were they excellent staging rehearsals--the music is not so very difficult; the staging is much more complicated and subtle, if you wish, than the music--but those gals were extremely dedicated to this opera.

The male roles are all smaller roles; they are of much less importance. Except there are some small character roles, which have to be cast right. And I think they were. Erich Leinsdorf conducted, and I remember that he insisted on having the dimmer for the stage lights at the conductor's stand, because, on account of the revolving stage, one had to play certain bars in darkness, and he wanted to be sure that one wouldn't turn the lights off too soon, or on too late, so that the orchestra would get into trouble

playing the postlude's introductory bars. And also, he liked to glorify himself, as Mr. Leinsdorf gladly does. So he insisted on having a dimmer at his stand, and he controlled the main light cues this way.

I mentioned Harry Horner. I remember--which amused the nuns very much--when he wanted something, he got so ecstatic that he was kneeling down and raising his folded hands to the singers and saying, "Oh please, you must do it this way." I have a very clear recollection of that production.

Pfaff: Was the idea of the revolving stage unusual at that time?

Adler: Yes. The San Francisco Opera House doesn't have a revolving stage, and we had to put a revolving stage on top of the normal stage, which we have used later on, on occasion, too. But it was not an easy task at that time, because it was new to the stagehands.

Pfaff: Was it, in essence, a unit set that you had?

Adler: No. But on the revolving stage were small sets for the many scenes which are characteristic of The Dialogues.

Pfaff: What did you do about getting the opera in English? Did you commission the translation, or did the publishers provide it?

Adler: They provided it. It wasn't a very good translation, I remember. As one always does, one doctored around with the translation. Most of the participants spoke French, so it worked quite well. Also, Horner speaks very good French.

I don't know if The Dialogues of the Carmelites would be a work which later on I would have done in French. The Met did it in French. I think City Opera did it also in English, if I am not mistaken.

Pfaff: And now the Met is coming around to doing it in English.

Adler: They changed it to English? I think I was right, in that case, and now with these subtitles, I think that Carmelites belongs to the kind of works which one should keep in the native tongue. It was given in Vienna in German, and of course the novel is in German.

You know other operas which are based on nuns? There is Suor Angelica--and there are nuns in Trovatore, but I was thinking of Suor Angelica. It was a problem to see so many women in nun's habits. And we studied--and I hope we didn't make too many mistakes--what Carmelites really wore in the times of the French Revolution.

It was very amusing, if I may make a personal remark, that a girl from the chorus quit to become a Carmelite nun. She is a nun in the Carmelite convent within half an hour from here, slightly north of San Rafael. She has been in touch with me since the early seventies when she became a nun. She writes; she sends me icons. I finally visited this little convent, and there are only fourteen nuns. They have an idea, a dream, that someday they would like to go to Russia and start a Carmelite convent in Russia. So when I visited there, they sang some Russian choruses for me; multipart choruses, really extremely well. And if they pray that well for me (because they write me wherever I am that they are praying for me and for my health and for my success, you know) then I am terribly grateful. It's a wonderful thing. I call them my fourteen girlfriends.

They have asked me if I wanted to go to a retreat. They had a room where I could stay, which amazed me.

For Carmelites, Leontyne Price and my late wife went to a convent north of New York, up the Hudson Valley, because I couldn't enter the convent at that time. They went in and asked the prioress if it would have been possible for a black woman to have been a prioress at a Carmelite convent during the time of the French Revolution. The answer was: possibly, yes; likely, no. That afternoon I engaged Leontyne Price.

You may recall that in paintings of the French Revolution, you sometimes see black nuns.

One thing that was very effective in the Carmelites: the nuns, all of them, go to the guillotine. And the way this was composed was really heartbreaking. I remember we worked very long on getting the right sound.

Pfaff: As each voice drops off, you mean?

Adler: No, no, no. The guillotine goes down, and the head falls. Cruel thing, but it's a very effective ending.

Pfaff: You intimated that there were problems with having all those nuns on the stage. Were there other problems?

Adler: There is a certain visual monotony. In Suor Angelica, the people were calling the nuns "the penguins." One time we did it in Stern Grove--it was a Merola Program--and I think they used the wrong habits. They were black and white, black mostly, which I think is wrong, if I'm not mistaken. But it certainly was wrong in Stern Grove, because it was a dark day, no sunshine, and all those black

women walking across the stage--which doesn't change my opinion that Suor Angelica is an absolutely beautiful work, musically. I love it.

Pfaff: What was the audience reaction in general to the Dialogues?

Adler: Good. I cannot say that it was enthusiastic, because it was not the kind of music that would really stir up an audience. But they were touched, and it was well liked.

We repeated it again, and it has also been repeated since I left. I think it is a work that deserves to come back every few years.

Carmina Burana and Jean-Pierre Ponnelle: 1958

Pfaff: I'm also very interested in your staging of the Carl Orff double bill. What gave you the idea to present them in that way?

Adler: Well, Carmina Burana is a work that musically and, as was proved, also dramatically, is well-suited for a stage performance. I mean, I knew the music, of course. Paul Hager, who staged the work, knew Orff quite well. Hager had worked in Munich a long time. Orff was living near Munich all the time, and they knew each other. And he arranged--that is Hager--that during one of my trips to Europe we visited Orff. Not only Hager, but also Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, whom I had not known. I met Ponnelle that winter in Munich.

Ponnelle at that time did not stage yet; he only designed. We spent a winter day at Orff's house, and Orff and I clicked very well. You saw probably the photograph Orff sent me, and I visited him a short time before his death, not in Munich, but at his lakeside residence there. He was very touched, and very friendly.

We discussed the entire project in detail, from, I think, eleven in the morning until eleven at night, that day. I remember Ponnelle was married to Margit Saad, the film actress, at that time. She came out later than Ponnelle, and she walked in there, and--[laughs]--it was very funny. We had discussed in the morning how each of us thought the soprano should look. And when Margit Saad, on a winter day, came in in a white suit, Orff exclaimed--and he didn't know who she was either--"That's the way the soprano should look!"

I didn't know who Margit Saad was at that time, although on the way back to Munich, Hager, who couldn't understand that I

didn't know who she was, showed me a billboard, and said, "That's she." And there she was on an enormous billboard. She was very popular at that time.

So they came here, and Ponnelle was not ready with the costume designs. Margit Saad was here, and she actually helped him. I think the costumes were stunning. The whole production of Carmina Burana was an exciting production.

Pfaff: Was Ponnelle actually recommended to you by Hager?

Adler: Yes.

Pfaff: Had they worked together?

Adler: I don't remember, I'm sorry. I would think so.

You see, Ponnelle had started doing Henze operas in Germany. Hager, of course, was quite interested in contemporary works, and he went there and saw them. So their paths had crossed. And I am glad to say that, since then, I've had a close relationship to Ponnelle. We all are human beings; we all have faults. And Ponnelle will be the first one to agree that he has faults, and he does some things wrong. But he still is, in my book, one of the strongest, most talented designers and directors--if he allows himself enough time. This is a problem with him: he sometimes accepts too much, and then he cannot concentrate on one thing. Well, if he gives it his thoughts, he can do fabulous things, and they are always intelligent.

They are sometimes a little, you know, sarcastic. He makes fun of the public sometimes, and the public senses this, and there are people who resent it. Others admire him, because, as a rule--when he doesn't have his grey period, where everything is grey--he uses beautiful colors and beautiful designs. And it is so intelligent.

There is another thing: he is a fabulous musician, and he knows every bar from memory when he does a work. When he needs a score, he will not consult the vocal score, the piano score, but he will consult the orchestra score. I think there are very few directors who can read an orchestra score well enough to use it in rehearsal.

Also, he is able to bring out in his cast certain things which nobody else can. That is one of the problems: for instance, if you repeat a Ponnelle production and he is not available to restage it, those people who have the thankless task to do it, cannot--by-far--do the same thing he does.

I had a very interesting experience once. I saw in one week on stage, three Ponnelle productions where he had not been present at the restaging, in two different cities. I knew the originals, and the difference was just incredible. His absence is so strongly felt, because he is such a forceful and interesting personality.

Pfaff: Was he already an interesting personality, and a big personality, when you met him?

Adler: He was always a little--what one calls in German a Lausbub, because he was so bright, and so talented. He is an enormous talent. And incidentally, his son (Margit Saad the mother) started as a conductor. I don't know if he made it, but I know that he started as a conductor. He has the name of Dominic.

But you must see the different works that Ponnelle has done, from Henze to Mozart's Magic Flute, and then of course in Zurich, all those Monteverdis and so forth. I think he also has an incredible skill as a movie director. He has directed opera movies which are so far superior to other opera movies that those people who bitch about them should be ashamed.

Pfaff: The one that comes immediately to mind for me is that brilliant Butterfly he did that they showed on television.

Adler: And that was one of his first. He has sometimes [unworkable] ideas--and I don't hesitate to mention one, for instance. When he was designing Rigoletto for San Francisco, he had the idea that the first scene should take place on an island in a lake. And all those courtiers were coming by boat, and so on, and I said, "For heaven's sakes, Jean-Pierre, I don't know if you saw this in Mantua, but whatever, one boat on the stage is a catastrophe. But if you want to bring a chorus, you cannot have more than six, or, maximum, eight people in a boat. Which would mean that you have seven, ten boats there on the stage. That will be a major disaster." And I got him to change this.

There was one very special case where I didn't like what he sent me. That was his Magic Flute. He sent a Magic Flute which was based on his Magic Flute in Salzburg, in the Felsenreitschule, which is wonderful. It is a beautiful and just superlative Magic Flute. But we don't have the Felsenreitschule on this stage, and he wanted to build something like those lodges in the rocks, which you cannot build. And then he wanted to cover them with lacquer. And I--I say this because I am so fond of Ponnelle, and I admire him so much--I didn't like the idea of Mozart's Magic Flute and lacquer. I didn't accept it, and we didn't do it. I don't know if

he did a Magic Flute since Salzburg. I think maybe he did one in Zurich.

Pfaff: What was the name of the schule you said?

Adler: Fel-sen-reits-schule, where the horse demonstrations took place in the medieval times, you know. It's a hippodrome, in the rocks. It has an English title, as a matter of fact.

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Adler: It's a riding school, really. Anybody who has the good fortune to go to Salzburg will have been there.

Pfaff: You said that Ponnelle's production of Carmina Burana was striking and beautiful. Can you describe it a bit for me?

Adler: Well, that was really the stroke of a genius. I can only say that it was the most beautiful chorus work. He can light a set like nobody else. He did miracles lighting this; at that time really. Now they have equipment here--gradually we acquired equipment, but at that time we didn't have it. The problem with lighting equipment in the theater is that after you buy it, a few months later they invent something new, and your equipment is obsolete.

Anyhow, to go back to Carmina Burana, there were backdrops which were beautifully painted. Ponnelle is a wonderful painter, also. And as I said, the costumes. And it was directed very well by Paul Hager; it wasn't Ponnelle.

And then, of course, Die Kluge. That is a theater piece, you know, and we did it with Larry Winter and Leontyne Price, two black singers at an early stage in their careers. That was a simpler set, which was much overshadowed by Carmina Burana.

Frau ohne Schatten: 1959. 1976. 1919

Adler: Then came the very interesting effort Ponnelle made as designer for the first Frau ohne Schatten here. I didn't have very much money for a new production, and Frau ohne Schatten has quite a few scenes, and you can go overboard, spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on new sets. But Ponnelle agreed to use and move a bridge which we had in stock from Francesca da Rimini. It was repainted, and he used it by adding to the bridge access, exits, steps; turning it, and whatnot. And out of this, with his wonderful sense

of color, he created the first, very primitive production of Frau ohne Schatten, for the American premiere.

I never got the last scene from him. He maintains that he sent it, but it never arrived here. He himself had been drafted into the French army at that time. He was in Morocco, and I remember calling him after the opening performance and talking to him in Morocco. He was completely amazed at that time that one could call San Francisco to Morocco. (This has all changed, because by now Ponnelle probably phones from wherever he is to the moon, if he feels like it.)

But we talked, and he said he had sent me that. We were forced to use a drop for this last scene, which a local painter painted for us. It was completely different, because without this incredible talent that Ponnelle has, it shows when someone else does something. And neither the colors nor the lines, nor anything else [were the same]. However, I must say that I have not seen a final scene of the Frau ohne Schatten yet which was entirely satisfactory.

Pfaff: I was going to say, it's an unfortunate scene to be lacking.

Adler: It is almost impossible. I would love to have Ponnelle take the time and look at his other scenes from this old set, and [hits table] just for the heck of it, paint the last scene for me the way he thinks he painted it. He probably couldn't do it, but I would be interested how Ponnelle resolves it--and this also as the stage director, you know.

This performance of Frau ohne Schatten was plagued by cancellations. It was a miracle that with all the cast changes it was the success it was. One knew after the first interlude, between the first and second scenes, that the public was with it to the last because there was a storm of applause, which somehow was regretful, because it killed some of the music. On the other hand, it was wonderful that the audience reacted so strongly.

Rysanek, who was sick and cancelled the first season, came and sang her historic Empress in 1976, which she has repeated, of course, when Böhm came here to conduct Frau ohne Schatten. Through a friend, I was in the position to get the new production, which I think was very good. It was done by Nikolaus Lehnhoff, who is doing the Ring here. He did really a very good Frau ohne Schatten. He repeated it in Paris also, and it was very similar to our Frau ohne Schatten. The designer was Jörg Zimmermann, who now designs a lot for Munich--a Swiss designer, actually.

Frau ohne Schatten has been very popular in San Francisco. Of course, later on we really had an excellent cast. Big names: Nilsson sang her Färberin here, and Rysanek sang the Empress, and Jimmy King sang the Emperor. [Walter] Berry sang a wonderful Barak here.

Pfaff: It broke my heart.

Adler: It is an opera which goes to your heart, as you say. I attended some of the first performances in Europe. I think it was 1919. There was a double cast at the Vienna Opera. One cast was Maria Jeritza as the Empress, and Lotte Lehmann as the Wife of Barak, and Richard Mayr as Barak. Now you see, that was a very interesting thing. Strauss wanted Mayr, because as a type, he loved Mayr. Mayr, however, was a bass, and that necessitated transposing the whole ending a full step down. It ends in C major--and I cannot say the ending is my favorite by Strauss--but it had to be in B-flat, because Mayr just couldn't go up there.

The other cast was also very good. Especially the Dyer's wife, Marie Gutheil-Schoder, whom I think I've mentioned before. She was a soprano who had been brought to Vienna by Gustav Mahler when he was still a conductor. But she became one of the main sopranos when he was a director, and she really was the first one to sing many Strauss operas in Vienna. Salome; Elektra; she sang also Carmen. She did a wonderful Carmen. She was a great actress and personality.

I remember how she mimed in Josephslegende, this pantomime that Strauss wrote. He was very, very fond of her. She sang also one of the best Octavians in Rosenkavalier there ever was.

Pfaff: When you heard her there in Frau, was she the Empress or Barak's wife?

Adler: Barak's wife. Lucy White, who was one of the Brünnhildes in Vienna at that time, sang the Nurse. [She] was very strong, and the interesting thing is that she was a soprano, a dramatic and Wagnerian soprano basically, and she was assigned to sing the Nurse.

When we did Frau ohne Schatten here, Irene Dalis was the Nurse, and I think it was one of my greatest achievements with Dalis, who is very, very conscientious and was very much afraid of this role. I remember during the rehearsal time I would take the opera north, to Portland and Seattle, and we had endless telephone conversations, Irene Dalis and I. I convinced her that she could do it, and she did.

More about Jean-Pierre Ponnelle

Pfaff: I wanted to ask you about the staging of the Ponnelle Frau--was that already a two-tiered set?

Adler: Oh yes, it has to be. I mean, that is the whole story. You need this for visual interpretation of the whole thing. That's what I meant with the bridge. The upper level was the top of the bridge, the Dyer's level; the human level was the lower level. But with the Ponnelle, the Dyer's house had colors of Ponnelle's that were as beautiful as in Carmina Burana. I often talked to him about this in more recent years--why he doesn't use his sense of color more.

Pfaff: What does he say?

Adler: Oh, it's a flippanant remark which amuses you, you know. Of course, if you look at the Rigoletto, for instance, the side walls are a beautiful painting. There are other colors there. He is also older; let's not forget that.

You know, he just did a new Cardillac by Hindemith in Munich, which was a big success. My son, who adores him too, assisted him, and he says always, "I learn so much from him." I forgot to ask him about colors. I must ask him how this was.

Pfaff: He seems to be periodically going back to the colors. I think when you go from his Così that he did for you to the Turandot that he did for you, color certainly came out.

Adler: The colors were rich, but I found that the variety that he used to have in something like Frau ohne Schatten or Carmina Burana [was missing in these].

And you know, there was again a thing which I don't like to do, but again: economy. This production of Turandot came from [Strasbourg] and the theater is a completely different auditorium. It is technically different, and I think that also the measurements of the stage are different. It worked here, but it was not the same.

It is the same as when Ponnelle insisted that we send our Flying Dutchman to the Met; it did not work at all, not artistically, and not with the public. The measurements didn't work, the distances were all wrong, the elevations were wrong--and the public wasn't ready for such a production.

I mean, the Flying Dutchman was also debated here--ferociously debated--but that's all right. Theater should create opinions, and when I watched how some of the public stood in the lobby for half an hour after the performance and argued wildly, I was delighted. Because that is what theater is all about.

Pfaff: Had he done directing elsewhere before you got him to direct here?

Adler: Oh yes. As a matter of fact he came here relatively late as a director.

Pfaff: What was the first thing he directed for you?

Adler: You'll have to look it up.¹

Pfaff: Did you regularly have to argue with him about details of a production, or did you pretty much let him--

Adler: Look! One never quite agrees, and we are such close friends that I felt free to mention my opinion, for what it was worth. It was sometimes very funny. After the Dutchman dress rehearsal, there were certain things I didn't like, and we sat in Lanzone's Italian restaurant in Ghiradelli Square for six hours for lunch. And over Italian wine, we argued about the German opera.

But I count myself lucky that I met Jean-Pierre, and that our artistic and personal relationship lasted through all these years. Actually, he is the godfather of my little girl. I am happy with this, and proud of it.

Pfaff: You certainly must have given him his American operatic debut?

Adler: Oh, yes, that I did. He says also--and I hope that it is so--that much of his development took place in the variety of operas here. The only problem is now that the San Francisco Opera has a large number of Ponnelle productions, but he cannot come, or one cannot afford bringing him here all the time, to do the staging. And that is, as we said before, a serious problem.

I think it's the case with each stage director. When a stage director has staged a production originally and you cannot bring him back when you show the production again, you run into trouble.

¹La Cenerentola, 1969

Wozzeck

Pfaff: Let's talk a little bit about the Wozzeck. You said that President Miller had encouraged you to wait until the time was right. What was it that told either one of you that the time was right in 1960?

Adler: Well, the public was accepting works which were not the standard works. The apparatus of the company--meaning the technical apparatus, the lighting, the orchestra, the chorus, everything--had advanced artistically and was more conducive to contemporary music. Although, obviously, Wozzeck wasn't contemporary anymore by the time we did it. Wozzeck is really a Romantic work, in a special musical language. But it is a language that, if you have the right cast--which we had--is difficult to resist.

And there were also people who left here during the performance, but basically it was a very, very successful production. The first time we did it we had to add an extra performance, which sold out too.

Pfaff: How was it possible in those days to add performances at that late date? You certainly couldn't do that anymore.

Adler: It was impossible, but we did it. We squeezed it in, you know. I had a certain schedule, and there were free nights towards the end of the San Francisco season where you could put in some performances which you had not planned. But you are right, the question is well taken.

On Rehearsal Spaces

Adler: San Francisco Opera always gave too many performances in any week of the season. And earlier there was even the problem that we had no real facility to rehearse in, before we had the rehearsal building. We rehearsed in halls which were small. They didn't even have rehearsal scenery or anything. I remember shuddering at rehearsing in the Armory.

The Armory has the advantage that you can put the same dimensions in it as the opera house stage, and you can put up several sets at the same time like a movie set or a television studio set. But the atmosphere is just awful. Acoustically impossible; it's ice cold, and it's just difficult to create an artistic atmosphere in a place like that.

So finally we succeeded in getting the Zellerbach Rehearsal Hall in 1981, which originally--I don't know if I can say this, but to my knowledge--was supposed to be named after me. But then the Symphony Hall was supposed to be Zellerbach Hall--after Harold Zellerbach. But when Mrs. Davies gave the money under the condition that it would be called Davies Hall, they changed the rehearsal building to Zellerbach Building, and only the main rehearsal area, which is a duplication of the opera house stage, is called Kurt Herbert Adler Rehearsal Stage. There's also a plaque; not too visible, but it's there.

It's a miracle how we got Wozzeck together without having a rehearsal stage.

Marilyn Horne and Wozzeck

Pfaff: So, dropping back to Wozzeck, what gave you the inspired idea to use Marilyn Horne as Marie?

Adler: It was by chance. I had heard about Marilyn Horne, but I didn't know her. She's from Los Angeles, as you know, and her agent was in Los Angeles--Dorothy Huttenbach. She was trying to sell me Marilyn Horne as Marie, but I had engaged Brenda Lewis, and I said, "I'm very sorry, you are too late. I have engaged Brenda Lewis, and I think she will be an excellent Marie."

So, what happens? During the early summer, Brenda Lewis advised me that she had an illness, and she didn't think she could learn within a couple of months this very strenuous role. So I called Mrs. Huttenbach back in Los Angeles, and I said, "Where is your Marie?"

She said, "Oh, she is coming back from Germany next Wednesday. Why?" And I said, "Well, she may have a chance." She said, "Oh, I'll send her up immediately to audition for you."

I remember very clearly, on a Saturday, early afternoon--you see, I worked Saturday afternoons--I was at the office, and there was a phone call from Marilyn Horne. She said, "I have arrived, and I would like to sing for you. But you know"--it was about two-thirty, three o'clock--"I got married at noon today. Do you have to hear me today?"

I said, "No, absolutely not. Why don't you take a few days. You want to stay here anyhow, I gather, so how about Tuesday?" On Tuesday she came, and she sang the entire Marie for me. I remember

saying to Marilyn after the audition, "Miss Horne, you sang awfully badly. But you're entitled to it, and you're engaged."

And that's how Marilyn Horne made her debut as Marie. The cast of Horne, Evans, Lewis, Alvary was really a phenomenal cast. Leopold Ludwig, who conducted, was at his best, and also Hager, whose production it was. And I should mention a name here, which I gladly mention: Leni Bauer-Ecsy. Leni Bauer-Ecsy was a German stage designer who lived in Stuttgart, where she was very much involved with the Stuttgart and Munich opera houses. She was also a great friend of Wieland Wagner's. She designed the first Wozzeck, and I think she designed it very, very well.

I still owe her an apology. She designed some clouds made of material, and those clouds, for economy reasons again, were not done very well, and she was suffering and was weeping about those clouds all the time. Later on I understood as I learned more and more, why she wept so.

But I remember her telling me during the technical rehearsal--you see, there are interludes and you have to make changes of scenery during interludes, and they have to be rehearsed like you would rehearse an army, in precision. She told me she needed here only a part of the time she needed in Germany for those rehearsals. She was very proud of our technical department, and so was I, I recall.

The flow of the performance is very important to Wozzeck, because the interludes play a great role, and if you have to stop all the time, that is no good. We could avoid this most of the time.

Pfaff: Did you already do it in one continuous long act then, or did you do it in three acts?

Adler: Hm. You have me. I think we did it originally in three acts, because that was a thing that we experimented with later on, which worked. I am not sure. As you know, we did Wozzeck repeatedly. We did it in English again; that is the way I thought it should be.

Pfaff: Was it in German the first time, or in English?

Adler: No, English. It was an all-English cast; American and British.

Anja Silja did a Lulu here. Was it in German that time?

Pfaff: She did. I saw it, but that I don't remember.¹

Adler: Her English wasn't too bad, and I would think we did it in English.

Pfaff: Her English was excellent. She did that wonderful Makropulos Case for you in English.

Adler: She always objected, and then she did it. She objected also to Katya Kabanova in Russian, and I sent a Russian coach to Hamburg to work with her.

Adler and the Artists: Boris Christoff

Adler: Anja Silja, Richard Lewis, Sir Geraint Evans--became close friends. And Leopold Ludwig, the conductor. If you establish an artistic relationship with a singer, or director, or designer, or conductor, you very frequently establish also a personal relationship. And that makes it possible not only to get better performances--it also means that they give you more time and they don't really price themselves out of the range that you can afford, because they like to be with you in a theater where they like to sing, and so on. I think I was fortunate enough to be able to achieve this.

There were people who said that I wasn't getting along with the artists. I think that was really not true. There were a couple of artists whom I couldn't engage because I was told not to engage them. And that is again something: It has been said that I never could be told anything. Well, maybe later on it was true, but I remember in my earlier years there were some artists who I would have liked to bring here, and I was told not to bring them for one reason or the other.

The facts show that almost all of the great artists sang here, again and again. Today, I still am in touch with almost everybody, and when I see them or hear from them, it is really a joy. But some less friendly people were spreading the news that I wasn't getting along with artists.

If there was something that I felt wasn't right, I quietly insisted. There was an incident, which I regret very much, with Boris Christoff. When Boris Christoff sang Boris Godounov here in 1956 we suddenly decided to have a new production. It was a production I don't think that later on I would have accepted for

¹In German: 1971

Boris, but at that time we did it. We notified the Hurok office, which was Boris Christoff's agent, of the fact that it would not be a traditional Boris production, but that the idea was a modern approach to the old Boris subject. Supposedly, Christoff accepted.

But when he was here, he suffered. I understood why he suffered, because that was something that was contrary to his artistic ideas. I had feared that, and that's why I told the Hurok office about it. He started arguing with the conductor, William Steinberg, a first-rate conductor, and that didn't go. Maybe he didn't conduct Boris the way Mr. Christoff wanted it, but there he was, and, naturally, in this dispute, I had to support the conductor.

Then Mr. Christoff walked off the stage in a rehearsal and wouldn't go back, and I sent word or maybe I told him myself, I don't remember--that unless he would continue the rehearsal within ten minutes, I would have to consider it breach of contract. He came back and he sang, but I was fully aware that this was the wrong thing, and I saw it coming.

But that was Christoff, and he probably wouldn't have come back. I have seen him since, and we spoke on friendly terms, but it was an incident that I regret, one of the very few such incidents I remember.

Designer Leni Bauer-Ecsy

Pfaff: I think the incident you just described with Leni Bauer-Ecsy is much lighter, but I missed the point. You said that you had to apologize to her about something, and I didn't quite get what it was.

Adler: Well, she designed some clouds for Wozzeck. They were made of some material, and hanging up in the flies, and the edge was badly sewn, for economy reasons; the whole thing wasn't right. She was very unhappy about those clouds. In those days I really had to do things on a shoestring.

There was another thing with Leni Bauer-Ecsy which I remember and I am very, very sorry about. She designed a Figaro here which was similar to a Figaro she had done for Günther Rennert, the famous director, in Munich. It was a wonderful Figaro, but here, instead of building things, we painted all kinds of scenery, and so on, and it wasn't done very well. It was not the light elegance that her sets had, and it wasn't liked.

She was really a first-rate designer, and Günther Rennert, whom I respected as one of the great stage directors, used her as often as he could as designer. Also Wieland Wagner had the greatest respect for her, and Professor Schaefer, Intendant in Stuttgart. She was really a great, great artist. I haven't talked with her for years, but she is a wonderful lady. Difficult to work with, very difficult.

Pfaff: Temperamental?

Adler: Strong-willed. All strong-willed people are difficult.

More About Marilyn Horne

Pfaff: I also want to make sure that I heard it correctly: did you say that at the audition when Marilyn Horne sang the entire role, she didn't sing very well?

Adler: She was tired, of course. I said, "You sang badly, and you are entitled to it."

Pfaff: [Laughs] Was that when she married Henry Lewis?

Adler: Yes. It was an hour before she flew up here for her audition. She just had come back from Gelsenkirchen, where she had been singing, in Germany. But you know, she really made a big career when she specialized in recent years in those baroque operas, the bel canto operas. That's where nobody can beat her.

Pfaff: Was she actually a soprano at the time?

Adler: Marilyn's voice was--[laughs]--Marilyn's voice. I remember riding with her once in a convertible in Los Angeles. I was driving, she was sitting next to me, and Henry Lewis was in the back. She was talking about her concern about what was really her Fach; which roles should she sing? After thinking about the matter for quite a while, I said, "Marilyn, I think in the long run you will sing Marilyn Horne roles and no Fach." And really, so it was. Actually, she admitted this.

I had her here in some roles which were not quite the best. She sang Eboli here once, and it was not very good, but you know, she is a unique artist. She sang Marie and had an enormous success. She sang her first Carmen for Spring Opera [1961] with Jimmy King. In English, of course.

We were very good friends. Later on I think she cancelled an opening night--that was La Favorita--very late, and I was in real trouble. I think she cancelled twice, and between her and her management and me that just didn't sit well. So there was for a while a distance between Marilyn Horne and Kurt Adler. But she certainly was one of the artists I always thought very highly of, and when Otto Preminger called me one night in Los Angeles in the middle of the night and said, "Do you know someone whom I could use to dub in the voice in the Carmen Jones movie?" I recommended Marilyn, and she did it.

San Francisco Opera at the Greek Theatre: 1957-1969

Pfaff: We don't have time to do both, I don't think. Would you rather talk about San Francisco Opera at the Greek Theatre, or about the beginning of Spring Opera?

Adler: Let's talk about the Greek Theatre. It is on my mind. You know, I am a Berkeley Fellow; I have a Berkeley Citation, and I'm quite proud of both things. I was, a week ago, at this year's Fellows Dinner at Berkeley, and every time I get in touch with old-timers there, they remember two things: one, the opera in the Greek Theatre, and especially the Pavarotti concert in the Greek Theatre, which we did once.

As I mentioned, when Mr. Clark Kerr became president he wanted for his inauguration an opera in the Greek Theatre. As it happened, we had Medea that season [1958] with Eileen Farrell, and Medea is certainly suited to be performed with a minimum of scenery. Farrell, who was an extremely successful American singer in those days, was really right for this, and we did Medea.

Pfaff: That was the first time ever in the Greek?

Adler: Turandot was first; 1957. I am not sure if the instrumentation of Cherubini is really ideal for an outdoor performance--maybe if you did it in the Acropolis, you know, with the blue sky of Greece and all that--but we did it, and we did all kinds of operas there.

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Pfaff: Rysanek was in Turandot.

Adler: Rysanek was in Turandot. In that performance a little dog decided to cross the stage. He passed, looked into the prompter's box, lifted his leg and went on. I'll never forget this moment.

I really liked performing in the Greek Theatre. It became extremely expensive to do it--not only to move the company over to the Greek Theatre and to make certain rehearsal arrangements for the production, but also we missed a Sunday matinee performance at the opera house. Incidentally, at one point the Sunday matinees didn't sell. Then they sold out. Anything you put on on a Sunday afternoon would sell out. So if you lose a sold-out performance and have to take a chance on a University God-knows-what, it becomes a financial problem. And I am wondering if also the interest diminished.

But I think with great pleasure of the years we went to Berkeley. I am happy when I go there now, and, as I said, old friends, old-timers, talk about the years of opera there. I think Clark Kerr is still very proud that he did this for his inauguration.

Pfaff: Yes, he speaks of it very highly. It's one of the things, whenever I'm in the Greek, I just wonder how you ever did it. It's such a very different facility from the opera house.

Adler: Well, it starts with the acoustics. If I remember rightly, we put a wooden floor under some instruments because the sound of the orchestra was not what we wanted. The orchestra against the fairly high wall of the stage didn't sound very good either, and the other problem is that the orchestra and the conductor are so much lower than the singers. The acoustical problems were manifold. And naturally, also, when you sit God-knows-where on the semi-circle, there's also a visual problem. I didn't have those visual problems, because the entire ambience of the Greek Theatre was such that I felt very happy with it, and I must say that the company liked to perform there.

The Turandot there had a minimum of Chinese decor; costumes and props were actually enough. I think that we gave many young people a wrong impression of what opera really is--but at least it was an operatic experience.

Pfaff: When you traveled over to Berkeley to perform in the Greek Theatre, did you not bring the sets? Did you just bring props and costumes?

Adler: You cannot. We brought some pieces of sets, or we had to change certain sets for Berkeley. You cannot hang anything, and not only that, you cannot nail anything down because of the concrete floor. Sometimes we worried when it became windy how to weight those pieces which we set up so that the wind wouldn't blow them down.

Pfaff: And of course you can't do anything about the lighting either.

Adler: It had to be in the daytime. If you are Max Reinhardt, then you just don't care and you spend the money on lighting. But that, not only money-wise, but also time-wise, would have been a problem. Where do you find the time for the people to rehearse, and technical people, and so on? Furthermore, it gets terribly cold there in the evening. We questioned what it would cost to put heat in, and we didn't.

Pfaff: It's almost unimaginable.

Adler: Impossible.

Pfaff: Did you do just one performance there, usually?

Adler: Yes. Under the sponsorship of the Committee for Arts and Lectures, I once took two operas there. One was Hansel and Gretel--that was all right; it was on a Sunday afternoon. The other one was Martha, which is not necessarily a drawing opera, and the Greek Theatre was not available on a Sunday afternoon, so we put it on on a Saturday afternoon. The attendance was miserable.

I have to say that was in my fairly early years in San Francisco, and I was responsible for the whole thing. I paid every cent, but I had hardly a cent left after I did it. The artists got what they were contracted for, which they didn't expect with that terrible attendance.

Pfaff: Did the big-name singers that you took there object to singing in the outdoors?

Adler: You mean when I took the fall opera there?

Pfaff: Yes.

Adler: Oh, some did. You know, some singers always complain.

A Special Pavarotti Concert: 1978

Pfaff: Do you have special memories about the day in 1978 you came over to the Greek Theatre with Pavarotti, on Charter Day?

Adler: Yes. We did a short concert with orchestra, without intermission, and the response was just incredible. Pavarotti was in a fabulous mood. He was joking and teasing and as happy as one can be. And you know, they remind me of it all the time. For some, this was a

great event; naturally, the star system is something that appeals to people.

I remember we went back and we had to participate in what they called an "Opera Fair" at the opera house that afternoon. Pavarotti and I had to make an appearance, so the campus police provided a police car driven by a lady with an Italian name--I have it somewhere--and we were driving across the bridge to be at the fair in San Francisco as soon as possible. Pavarotti sat next to the lady and Mrs. Pavarotti and I were in the back. [The taxi driver] really didn't know about opera, and didn't quite understand what Pavarotti stood for, I think. Anyhow, he suddenly sang an aria, the tenor aria from Così fan tutte, which I didn't even know he knew. He sang for this gal driver on the bridge, a cappella, and when he was through, I said to her, "Do you realize that this man earns thousands of dollars when he sings this aria under other circumstances? And you got it for free, while you were driving." She was very much impressed, and came to the opera house afterwards.

Pfaff: Not to mention the oddness of hearing him sing that aria.

Adler: Yes, that surprised me.

Pfaff: I remember he was in stunning voice that day, too.

Adler: He was in fabulous voice and fabulous mood, and frequently when singers are in a very good mood, they are in better voice.

Pfaff: I remember you started with the Meistersinger prelude.

Adler: I don't remember the program.

Pfaff: Yes, you started with Meistersinger, which I think you just own.

Conducting the Student Orchestra at UC Berkeley: 1949-1950

Adler: [Laughs] Well, I remember my entire affiliation with UC Berkeley with great affection. I believe I told you that when Joaquin Nin-Culmell came late in 1949, they asked me if I'd help them for two semesters to conduct the student orchestra there. Professor Albert Elkus, who was the head of the music department, in his farewell year, was the one who advocated this whole battle against the loyalty oath. So the students, especially the music students, were much involved. He would complain sometimes that they were

going more frequently to political rallies than to orchestra rehearsals.

Pfaff: Did it sound like that when you got them?

Adler: No. I asked once why I didn't get the first-string winds. They said, "Because they play in the band, so they can go to the football games." So I said, "Well, I'll take the orchestra to the football games too. I'd like to go myself."

Elkus wanted certain things and he was very much in favor of my doing the Fourth Bruckner Symphony in the last concert before he retired. The strings didn't like particularly to play this, very much tremolo, so the attendance of string players was not glorious, but it went very well; everybody was ecstatic, players and audience, and they came to me and thanked me, that I had forced them to play the Bruckner, because they were so overcome by this concert.

I may conduct the Fourth Bruckner in May in Shanghai this year, with the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra. It will probably be a similar situation, that the strings have to be coaxed into liking the rehearsals, and hopefully when the concert comes, they will succumb the way the students in Berkeley did.

Performing with the WPA Orchestra

Adler: As we discussed, that was the second time that I had such a success with this Fourth Bruckner. When I did it once in Chicago with a WPA orchestra, which was called the Illinois Symphony Orchestra, the orchestra didn't care particularly to rehearse it.

There was a very wrong situation at WPA. The orchestra was supposed to be in the rehearsal place for eight hours a day, like workmen. Well, obviously, I didn't rehearse eight hours. Sometimes I rehearsed three hours in the morning, three hours in the afternoon, but that was the maximum time you can rehearse an orchestra. Six hours a day, especially when the strings are taxed as they are in the Bruckner.

The night of the concert, President Roosevelt suddenly announced a Fireside Chat; and since this was WPA, I was called and was told that one had to broadcast the President's chat. The Fireside Chat was scheduled for nine o'clock, so that I decided to play the Bruckner in the first hour of the concert.

So we finished, as arranged, at nine o'clock, and they turned the speakers on, and Roosevelt started to speak. And although the public at a WPA concert were faithful Democrats and Roosevelt people, they applauded for the first five minutes of his Fireside Chat, and one couldn't hear the President speak. And that was the night that Bruckner won over Roosevelt.

The 1958 Season and the Critics

Pfaff: Why don't we finish up with the '58 season. Mr. Bloomfield reports in his history of the opera that there were some reasons to consider part of the season artistically weak, or regrettable. What's your response?

Adler: First of all, I don't recall this. When you informed me about this statement of Mr. Bloomfield's, I checked with the gentleman who was the last chairman of the board and on the board at that time, and he couldn't recall it either. When I read what Mr. Bloomfield had to say otherwise about the '58 season, I am not quite sure what he meant, at least artistically.

However, if you work in opera, you must be prepared to face criticism right and left. As we say all the time, there are thousands of opera directors in each city that has an opera company, and each one thinks he can cast better; he can produce better; he can have a better repertoire.

There was one specific thing that was criticized in '58. We did a new production of Bartered Bride. The leads, incidentally, were Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Richard Lewis, and Giorgio Tozzi, so--they weren't so bad. And the conductor was Leopold Ludwig, who was born in Czechoslovakia. But the public, or some of the public, didn't like Bartered Bride, which was considered an opera for high school productions--and still is in many places in this country.

Well, I dare say that this is not so. I think that Smetana's music is wonderful, and actually, also, the plot is a nice plot. It's not sophisticated, by any means, but it's funny. Perhaps Mr. Hager, who directed the opera, made the mistake in this performance to be the circus director. And I think this was not very well liked by some of the audience. And certainly there were also some people--I had been in charge since 1953--there were some people who didn't like me, so they took the opportunity to kick.

But you have to be prepared for such things. You regret it; you regret sometimes what you have done, and you hope to do it better the next time. But then there will be others who kick for other reasons, in the audience, or in the press. But that is the business of opera.

Pfaff: One of the things that Mr. Bloomfield specifies is that there were problems that no one could help with tenors. Do you remember that as a bad season for tenors?

Adler: I don't remember.

Pfaff: It was just that there weren't many available. There were some cancellations, and Mario Del Monaco didn't come that year, and Vickers didn't come that year.

Adler: Yes, but he didn't cancel.

Pfaff: No, he didn't.

Adler: Del Monaco was one man whom one had to stay away from for a while because when Merola died in '53, he had cancelled sixteen performances, and the reasons were not very clear. But I think he came back the next year, in '59.

Pfaff: This is just what he says [quoting Arthur Bloomfield's Fifty Years of San Francisco Opera]: "Miller and Adler were sufficiently concerned to make sure they hired a top tenor like Del Monaco for 1959. Presumably the statute of limitations had run out over his problematic cancellation in 1953."

Adler: Ah, there you are. That's probably where Miller comes in, because Miller naturally was able to take the stand for the interest of the company.

Pfaff: Yes. Then he says, "With Jon Vickers and Giuseppe Zampieri also on hand, not to mention Lewis, the tenor department revived markedly." That's what's so hard to understand. When you look at '58, you have Björling singing Manrico, and--

Adler: I think he came late, or something, and he had to be replaced at first.

Pfaff: And [Piero Miranda] Ferraro you have twice here.

Adler: Yes. Ferraro was an upcoming tenor who didn't make it. He was short and had a stocky figure, and he didn't make it. I remember also he sang Don Carlo that year if I am not mistaken, and that was not really the ideal cast for Don Carlo. His wasn't a bad voice,

but he wasn't a star. I think the confidence in no-name singers was created later. When someone was not a star name at that time, the public wasn't happy.

VII THE BEGINNINGS OF AN OPERA EMPIRE: THE 1960s

[Interview 7: March 9, 1985] ##

Remembering Toscanini

Adler: I recall a Meistersinger rehearsal--it was the Sachs and Eva duet of the second act--in Salzburg. [Lotte] Lehmann had probably sung Eva a number of times. Toscanini had definite ideas, and he worked very hard and very patiently with her for hours on this duet, which lasts just a few minutes. A few days later, when the duet was being rehearsed again, Lehmann sang, but she didn't find Toscanini, she found Lehmann again; she came back to her old way of doing it.

Toscanini said very little. I left the rehearsal--it was in the hall of the Universität--with him, and I asked him, "Maestro, were you pleased with today's rehearsal?" And he understood immediately, and said, "Oh, I know, La Lehmann."

I said, "Yes." And he said, "Look. Music must be elastic, elastic like water." Ma come l'acqua pura, clear water. But he felt that Lehmann was entrenched in her ways, that he had told her what he could, and to be stiff and rigid about it would not make sense.

Pfaff: That is a different impression than one had of him from stories.

Adler: I think that the stories give a very different impression of the man than the one I had of him in Salzburg. I remember my rehearsal of Magic Flute. It's a bad tradition that at the end of the first part of the Magic Flute overture, there is a ritardando. [Imitating music] "Dyen-Ba-Ba-Baa---Bam." It comes automatically, you know. It doesn't read so, and Toscanini tried very hard to get the orchestra not to do it. But he had a problem because, without saying so, I think that some musicians changed in different rehearsals. There were always some who were surprised by his going in tempo. But he finally got it.

When the performance came, he himself made the ritardando. It was a little messy, because some followed what he had said, and some followed his beat. There you are, you see, that was Toscanini.

On the other hand, I remember an episode in a Meistersinger orchestra rehearsal. [Sings phrase from Meistersinger] "Heilt, Meister, nichts..." in the first act. He was beating it in two and didn't make much of the retard there. And the orchestra was shaky until the concertmaster got up--it was Arnold Rosé, the famous Professor Rosé of the Rosé Quartet--and said to Toscanini, "Maestro, you know, all the Kapellmeisters here were beating four. That's why we have a little problem here. But it will come."

And he said, "The Kapellmeister beat four?" Rosé said, "Yes." He said, "Ha, diese Meisters." That's a quotation from the second act of Walther. Walther says, "Ha, diese Meister, wie böse Gäste von..." and so on. And Toscanini, good natured, just made a joke about it. So it is not that he was always impatient.

He was a very kind man. I remember a little personal episode. One day we were again leaving rehearsal at the Universität in Salzburg, and Toscanini was shy of photographers. He hated them. And when we left, in the entrance were some movie photographers standing, who wanted to take a shot. And Toscanini did this [raises hands over eyes], and covering his eyes with his hands, elbows stuck out, he went with the elbow in my eye, and really hurt me very badly. He was terribly concerned about this, forgot the photographers, and then this scene was in the weekly news. [chuckles]

So you see, he hated photographers, but he was more concerned that he had hurt me, walking next to him, than his shyness about the photographers. But the basic thing is, naturally to study and learn. Listen to early phonographs, to records of the early days. They are so different.

The Creation of Spring Opera Theater: 1961

Pfaff: Well, we were going to talk about Spring Opera today.

Adler: [I started] Spring Opera for a large number of reasons. One, coming from Europe, where, let's take Germany--or let's take even Italian opera companies--where they have short stagiones, but they have many seasons in a year. There was hardly a season even in

small cities less than six or seven months long. So the five weeks in San Francisco bothered me.

In addition, you don't have enough performances to offer. People were always saying, "When is this opera coming? When is that opera coming?" Well, if you want to rehearse, you cannot do an incredible number of different operas in five-six weeks. It is impossible. So my thought was one could widen the repertoire by having two seasons, and play in the Spring Opera season works mostly that are not in the fall opera.

Also, there was a change of theater, when we went from the Opera House to the Curran. It was a [considerable] change because it was a smaller house. A smaller stage, and there was lighting, and so on.

Then I wanted to offer young singers more opportunities--which was difficult in the fall season, and I'm not convinced that one does service to young singers at all times when you put them on the stage with those great stars, most of them with great routine also. Young singers need an outlet. It's also highly individual, which obviously art is, anyhow. But there are singers for whom it is better to sing a small role in the company with--let's use the odious word--stars, in a big house, in a big company. Others profit more in that stage of development to sing big roles in a smaller company. That is hard to tell; there is no final answer.

Now when we had young singers in the opera house, I found that there was a disadvantage for a young voice to sing immediately in this bigger house. But also in the operas which were duplicated--and there were always one or two--it was difficult for the young singers because they were compared to the people who sang it in the fall. If you do Bohème, and we did an English Bohème with a young cast, and a very nice cast--but to be compared with Albanese and Björling and so forth is not very healthy, right?

And then came the question of time in this. Naturally, the acoustics were better in the opera house than they were in the Curran, but we couldn't afford a large string section. And the small string section in the opera house wasn't good either. With a skillful conductor who was able to control the balance, a small string section--and even if you would have had the money, there wasn't the space in the Curran's pit--was more effective in the Curran than in the opera house. And also the comparisons were dangerous for the orchestra, because we did not have the same orchestra at that time in the spring as we had in the fall, since many of the players played with the symphony, which performed at the same time as the spring season.

Then came the experimental works. An experiment in the War Memorial Opera House, on account of the size of the scenery, automatically costs more money than in a smaller house. And you can use certain designs on a small stage which you cannot use in the big house. So I believe that the justification of the spring season was there.

It is the sad truth that, even with utmost economy, you lose a lot of money on a more modest and smaller season as Spring Opera did at the Curran. What I am talking about now are perhaps thoughts already which were mine, and which I had to share with the people on my board, to whom I was responsible. I think that originally some board members of the Cosmopolitan Opera approached me, and I went with them to the president of the San Francisco Opera, Robert Watt Miller, and talked about the desire of continuing something. Not the same thing, but something, to make up for the loss of the Cosmopolitan Company.

The Cosmopolitan Company was the luxury of an individual [Campbell McGregor] who wanted to please his wife, who somehow was not--for reasons beyond my knowledge--on the board of the San Francisco Opera. Not active. Her husband had a lot of money, and he paid, more or less single-handedly, the season's losses of the Cosmopolitan Opera. And they had the not very pleasant habit of engaging singers who were popular but who could not be engaged, or didn't want to be engaged by the San Francisco Opera.

Now, obviously, in a five-week season, you can only have a limited number of favorite singers, as you can only have a limited number of favorite operas at one time. And my answer to those people who asked and complained, if you wish, was "Please have patience and wait. In a year, in two years, you will get the singers and the operas you wish. But there are always people who are disappointed. And now, at the moment, I regret to say, that it is you." So that was my answer.

So they engaged, with higher fees, singers who were not singing at the San Francisco Opera. The gentleman who was the sponsor of all this, to please his wife, actually was a very friendly man with whom I was on very good terms. It was interesting to me that when he suddenly had enough--and this was in the middle of the season--he called me and told me that this was the last season he was funding, and that he was notifying his manager and the press [in] two hours that it was over. But he called me first to tell me, in a very friendly way.

Anyhow, there were some doubts about the wisdom of having Spring Opera--was Western Opera started earlier or later?

Pfaff: Later.

Western Opera Theater--Opera on Tour: 1967

Adler: Western Opera, of course, had a completely different function, in my book. The idea behind Western Opera was that it should play for people and in places where opera would otherwise not be heard, which is completely different from Spring Opera. (I tried also to take Spring Opera to other places, which didn't work very well.) Western Opera was definitely a touring outfit. Their short season here, whatever it was, was a calling card in order to let people know that Western Opera existed, and what it was like, and also we had some sponsors besides the federal government which wanted it to be known that they'd given money to Western Opera. So we did some performances here, which had a completely different artistic impact from the Spring Opera.

Incidentally, I perhaps should mention this here. I had brought something up at the National Endowment for the Arts. There was always talk about contemporary works, and creation of new American works, and whatnot. And I said it would be my ambition that a touring company--at the moment there were two major touring companies: one was Texas Opera Theater, the other was the Western Opera Theater--must have at least one contemporary new work on their repertoire, which they should perform in the smaller places, because the progress of contemporary music should not be made only by some occasional performances in big cities. I think the general audience should also realize that there is something like contemporary music and contemporary opera. That is something that interested the Endowment very much, and they thought about a special way of funding such performances.

More About Spring Opera and the American Opera Project

Adler: Well, Spring Opera. It had a board, and there was always a certain jealousy between the San Francisco Opera board and the Spring Opera board, which I think was not necessary. But the feeling was that there was money being raised that should go to the San Francisco Opera and instead it went to the Spring Opera. I think that this was all wrong, and very short-sighted, because Spring Opera created a different public. And as the repertoire of the San Francisco Opera was modified, we gained a new public for the bona fide repertoire. So it worked together very well.

I was very sad when, after my departure, Spring Opera was given up. I think Spring Opera and the broadcasts fall in the same chapter. At this point there is a lot of discussion, all over the United States, that besides the major company, even if it is a small major company, you should probably have some smaller companies, which perform in smaller houses where they can perform other literature in a less expensive way and still introduce more literature, old and new, to the public--possibly to a new public.

We had here the American Opera Project, where there was some money from the Endowment, and we did first [John] Harbison's Winter's Tale in the Herbst Theater which, I regret to say, is really not very suitable for opera performances. It's acoustically very bad; it's space-wise bad and so on. But you make a go of it if you have nothing else, and I think the city of San Francisco should look into this, and find a theater which would be really suitable for opera on a smaller scale.

The first year, the people were not so interested in the Harbison. The next year we did Tartuffe [by Kirke Mechem] and we had such an attendance that the fire chief came, because somehow people were allowed to get in and [were] standing in aisles. And he rightly said that it's very, very dangerous. But he didn't throw them out. We went on. But the interest grew in one year for contemporary works done by this American Opera Project.

I remember, for instance, we did [John] Eaton's Cry of Clytemnestra, which was probably the most, in quotes, "contemporary" or "modern" opera we did. Now Eaton has a major work [The Tempest] this year in Santa Fe, on the repertoire. There is so much talk about composers in residence--well, the rehearsals for those new works were rather extensive, and took time. Mr. Harbison came here, participated in all rehearsals, and he told me after the work had been done, not only that he learned a great deal about what to write and not to write (or how to write), but that after his opera was performed it became known and he had many more performances of his other works, symphonic works, or chamber or whatever it was.

So it is also important for the composers that they hear their works in rehearsals of professional companies and in professional performances. Workshops are fine, but they usually have a little undertone, you know, which is not quite the same. But better workshops than nothing.

The major European theaters all have studios now. Take Hamburg: they were one of the first ones to have a studio. Vienna

was trying to have a studio, and I don't know if it materialized. Munich had a studio. I think Berlin has a studio.

Incidentally, talking about smaller houses, La Scala, which is the biggest European house, had La Piccola Scala, which was not very well built. They had construction problems, and when it was all done, they had to open it up again because they couldn't fit the scenery in it. But anyhow, they had the Piccola Scala, and in the Piccola Scala originally, the same singers, the big singers, were also performing. That they gave up, and then they had the young singers singing in the Piccola Scala. Then finally the Italian government, which is the main supporter--because they have some private sector support, but mainly government--stopped their activities in the Piccola Scala, and they perform very rarely now, which is regrettable.

But I think that the money spent on Spring Opera, and lost on Spring Opera, was not wasted. It was rather an investment in talent--both creative, performing, and technical talent--and in creating a new public. So. Loss versus investment, or investment versus loss, we should say.

Raising Funds for the Spring Season

Pfaff: I'd like to return to the days when the transition was made from Cosmopolitan in the spring to Spring Opera. It seemed like one of the important players at the time was James Schwabacher. Do you remember what role he had? According to Bloomfield, he and a man named William Kent--

Adler: Kent is a more energetic fellow than Jimmy, and they both were involved. But there was a vice president of the opera company who was the daughter of one of the early presidents of the opera, Mrs. Stanley Powell. She went with a couple of ladies who had been on the board of the opera, and with me, to Mr. Miller. Mr. Miller had more use for ladies than for me--and for others--and that really, I think, gave the final push.

Now Jimmy Schwabacher, of course, is very much interested in young talent, and he had great interest.

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Pfaff: And then Arthur Bloomfield mentions this woman who was one the board--

Adler: Yes, Mrs. ah--

Pfaff: Cuenin.

Adler: Cuenin. She was a very energetic old lady.

Pfaff: Well, then he says, "When Mrs. Cuenin and her friend Mrs. William Woods-Adams called a meeting of persons interested in opera in 1960, the purpose was to form a company to succeed the Cosmopolitan."

Adler: Correct.

Pfaff: "--albeit on a more modest scale. But at least two persons," he says, "William Kent II, a young businessman and opera lover, and the author"--I think he means himself--"left the meeting with the feeling that San Francisco could afford more opera performances but not more opera companies. James Schwabacher, San Francisco business executive, professional singer, and music commentator--felt the same way--"

"As a result of discussion among the three, Schwabacher suggested that a sponsoring group be formed to raise money and that the San Francisco Opera be asked to produce for it a small season of appropriate character."

Adler: That's possible.

Pfaff: Yes, and he says that Kent went to Miller with the idea.

Adler: I don't remember this. I remember the meeting when I went with the ladies: Mrs. Powell, who was the vice president and a nice lady. Her father was chairman of Del Monte. Anyhow, to my recollection, Jimmy Schwabacher was not in this group when I went with the ladies to Mr. Miller. And I am afraid that--I don't know if I should say this in this case--but there was not a close relationship between Mr. Miller and Mr. Schwabacher.

But there is no doubt that Schwabacher over the years did a lot, especially for young singers. And his friendly personality and whole attitude made a lot of things possible, starting from the Merola Memorial Fund--as it was called at first--to the San Francisco Opera Auditions, and so forth, which I think played a very important part in the operatic and musical education of San Francisco. And there Schwabacher was very effective.

Rightly or wrongly, I did many things on my own. I didn't work with many people, and I was also accused--and perhaps rightly accused--that I didn't delegate enough. But you can only work

according to your own personality. And Mr. Miller had great confidence in me.

I told you about going with the opera guild ladies on a promotional tour for The Girl of the Golden West to Virginia City. And the ladies, Dorothy Kirsten, and I flew to Reno. There we had to transfer to a bus, and had to wait. While we waited, I won three jackpots and not so small ones. And on the return trip, we came by bus from Virginia City and had to wait for the plane, and again I won three jackpots. The ladies looked at me, and said, "How do you do it?" And I said, "I really don't know, but do you think Mr. Miller, the president, would let me run the opera company if I were not a successful gambler?" This is naturally very important. If you deliver the goods, you gain confidence.

Pfaff: How long had you had the idea in mind of doing Spring Opera before it came to fruition?

Adler: I don't know. It just became very obvious to me. I had been here since 1943. I took over as artistic director in '53, and it became more and more obvious to me that it wasn't enough to have a season of five weeks here. I cut back in the number of operas. Maestro Merola used to give a very large number of operas here, and they were under-rehearsed, usually. This was not the way I wanted things to go, so I gave only a few operas.

I sensed that San Francisco was an opera city, and one could do more if one could organize it--meaning finance it. The other thing was as I took over I wanted to find a way to develop young talent better, and on a larger scale, than had been done before. That is where the Merola Opera Program and San Francisco Opera Auditions came in.

Pfaff: When you actually got the first Spring Opera on the stage in 1961, was that already in the Curran?

Adler: No, no, no, no. It started at the opera house. I soon felt that this was not quite right. It wasn't right organizationally, financially, and especially not for the artistic purposes of Spring Opera Theater, as it was called then, because I tried to give more rehearsal time to the directors, so that the theatrical element of opera could come out more. And then, young voices fare better in a smaller house. Also, as I said, the orchestra, the chorus.

Spring Opera's Repertoire and Marilyn Horne

Adler: You know, one of the productions I very gladly remember, and we repeated it also, was the dramatic version of the Bach St. Matthew Passion, which I think was a beautiful work. This worked, really, better the way we did it in the smaller house than it would have in the opera house. We had two smaller choruses facing each other, as the idea was. In the opera house we would have had to have two big choruses, you know. But there it worked extremely well.

Pfaff: I think that was one of the really outstanding productions of Spring Opera, just because it was so unusual. Was it your idea to do it there?

Adler: There was also another one which fared well there, by Britten.

Pfaff: Death in Venice.

Adler: That's right. Remember? That was really a highly artistic effort, which was, as the publishers told me, one of the very best, if not the best production [of] Death in Venice that has been put on anywhere.

But then also, you know, we did The Abduction from the Seraglio. Unfortunately, the Abduction is a work which very rarely is successful in public. You can spend a lot of money. I remember Bruno Walter conducted it at the Met once, and it still was not very successful. It had not been in the San Francisco Opera repertoire, but I felt that Spring Opera should do it, so we did.

On the other hand, I am not sure about Julius Caesar. I wasn't very happy with what came out. Perhaps the approach of the director, and the casting, was not what it should be. And Julius Caesar is perhaps something that demands the bigger company at least, if not the bigger stage too.

Pfaff: One of my curiosities was, looking back over the Spring Opera seasons, how could you, in that first year, afford to put all the time and energy into just one performance each of the operas?

Adler: You know, when you want something very badly, and you want to give it a start, you do it. I agree that it is nonsensical. But we were not sure if it had a public of more than three thousand. Now, naturally, it's nonsense that we won't get three thousand people on the same night, nowadays. It was very questionable what the people would say to unknown names here. It is a fact that a public anywhere is name- or star-minded, if you wish. And that was very questionable.

Pfaff: Did it help that Marilyn Horne had just sung her Marie, and then came back in the Carmen?

Adler: Did she sing in the first year?

Pfaff: Yes, the Carmen was in the first year, with James King, yet.

Adler: Yes? I don't remember, but Carmen sold better than other things, naturally, whether it was Marilyn or not. It should have. Marilyn wanted to sing Carmen, and you see, she was also a young artist in development. The [1960 Wozzeck] Marie was more or less her first major assignment in the United States. She had been singing in Germany, and she was a member of the opera house in Gelsenkirchen, which was a very well-known opera house. It had high standards, and I think also an interesting repertoire, if I remember rightly. But she was still in her early stage. And naturally to sing Marie and then Carmen in the same house was very good for her.

Pfaff: I noticed that in that season you didn't have Henry Lewis conducting her Carmen, but he did conduct that season. Was that a conducting debut for him?

Adler: What did he conduct?

Pfaff: The Traviata.

Adler: In Spring Opera? It could be.¹ Marilyn was always a tough customer, and after her success she may have said at that time, "Listen, you had better give something to Henry, too, if you want me for Spring Opera." I don't recall.

I like Henry; he's a nice guy. And I think, actually, he's a better conductor than he showed here. The orchestra was not too cooperative with him--and it's funny, I don't remember this La Traviata. He and I got along very well.

The Importance of Colleagues

Adler: When you run an opera company--or when I used to run the opera company--I liked to talk to other people. I think that in general I followed my own thoughts of what I thought was good, or right, but I liked to talk to people. Henry was one with whom I liked to

¹It was Lewis's debut with the company.

talk. Another one was Harry Horner, whom we mentioned before. As a matter of fact, I read yesterday in the Reinhardt book, how Reinhardt liked Harry Horner so much for the student in his Faust productions--Goethe's Faust--in Vienna and so on. Harry then became a well-known figure in the movie world here in Los Angeles, and also in opera, because he designed for me. I think he did also something for the Met.

So to talk to people, for me at least, was important. Paul Hager was another one. Ponnelle is one. There were conductors: William Steinberg. Actually, when I think back, I talked a lot to most of the good conductors. (You cannot have only good conductors, for there are not enough good conductors. I couldn't afford them either; and some conductors I couldn't guarantee enough rehearsals.)

Making Spring Opera Work

Pfaff: One of the things [you notice] when you look over the roster of Spring Opera seasons is the incredible array of young talent that came through. The ones that stand out in my mind are the appearances of Maria Ewing, and Barbara Hendricks, and Leona Mitchell, Jimmy Hoback--

Adler: David Eisler--

Pfaff: Brenda Boozer, Frederica von Stade--among the young people. Are there any people that you really felt come into their own in these productions?

Adler: I think Frederica von Stade, certainly, when she sang in Titus, she found herself. It was her first major success, and I'm very happy that I was able to do this.

It was really funny, I didn't know her. She auditioned for me in the orchestra rehearsal room of the Metropolitan before a performance of Tales of Hoffmann. And she was half-dressed, and half-made-up when she sang for me. I think only a girl like Flicka, who is so nice, and whom I consider a close friend ever since, would do such a thing. But she did, and I think Sextus--that "Parto, parto" was a very, very difficult aria (the famous aria with the clarinet solo). She, as well as the clarinet player, were more than they really were at that time.

Pfaff: Maria Ewing. You used her quite a lot.

Adler: Yes. I think very highly of Ewing. She gives very, very good performances, and we could use her both in the spring and in the fall. Who else?

Pfaff: Barbara Hendricks?

Adler: There you have a case. Barbara has a lovely voice, but it is a very small voice. I haven't heard her in years--actually she was supposed to sing Gilda in the Rigoletto I conducted here last year. (I think she had a baby.) So the involvement in the spring was very good for her.

I'd like to mention another girl who did not make a superstar career, whom I consider a very good artist: Carmen Balthrop. She sang the soprano role in the Saint Matthew's Passion in spring in one series. I thought that the Spring Opera was very good for her and she was good for Spring Opera.

But Barbara Hendricks. At the time she sang here, I don't think that she really should have sung in the San Francisco Opera company, and probably not in the big house, because of this very small voice--or it was at that time. It may have grown. What did she sing?

Pfaff: She was in L'Ormino, with you.

Adler: Oh, yes. She wanted always to go dancing, and I remember she said, "We must go boogie." And we went to some funny place in North Beach once after a performance, and I had had an accident and I had my arm in a sling. We really danced, and people bumped into it, into me, and it was horrid. Whenever I saw her later, she said, "When are we going boogying again?" [laughs]

But Maria Ewing, I think, learned a great deal from Spring Opera. I wish, for instance, that a girl like Susan Quittmeyer could have made her development in Spring Opera rather than the San Francisco Opera.

Pfaff: You did use her in Spring Opera, didn't you? I'm not sure, I just thought you had.

Adler: I'm not sure. [She sang Cherubino in 1981.]

Pfaff: I think when you revived the Titus--

Adler: Brenda Boozer.

Pfaff: Yes, Boozer was the Sextus.

Adler: But Susan, her real development came later. Then she went and sang in smaller companies in Los Angeles and whatnot--major roles. Octavian, and so forth, the Composer in Ariadne she sang there first; big success. That is the right role for her.

But I cannot emphasize enough my belief in something like Spring Opera.

Pfaff: Were you still in the company when you got word that it was being phased out?

Adler: I don't think so.

Pfaff: You kept it up to the very end, didn't you?

Adler: Yes. I think that was one of the first things that was abandoned when I left. I mean, the fact that I was able to keep it going in spite of adverse financial circumstances speaks very much for the executive board of the San Francisco Opera. They knew what it meant to me, and they understood what was behind it, and then, as long as I was pushing it, it worked. But it was costly; I cannot deny this. And there was no way of making this thing go better financially.

What didn't work was the fund-raising. I mean, the money was really not so bad. But I knew that in balancing the financial situation, it was impossible to take in enough money to do this. I hoped that it would be possible to raise that money, that there would be people who would understand--and there were some people who did. I have always stressed that in fund-raising you must find the right people for the right thing. You can go to corporations, foundations, or Mr. and Mrs. X and tell them you would like money for this-and-this purpose, and unless you know that X is really interested in this, you made a mistake. Just asking for money is wrong in fund-raising. Ask for a purpose.

That's, I think, what helped me raise money a great deal. I think I found the right people and organizations for the right purpose. But maybe I hesitated myself, because there was so much talk about putting money into Spring Opera that should have gone into San Francisco Opera. The snobs naturally thought, "Spring Opera? What for?"

On the other hand, an organization like Spring Opera could only exist under the auspices of a major organization. If you would have tried to run it separately, it wouldn't have worked.

Pfaff: Were there other aspects of company talent that you were able to develop there? I wonder particularly about conductors. It seems

that with Andrew Meltzer and David Agler and people that you've had around, was it a big opportunity for them?

Adler: Yes. It should have been, naturally. Although when I started out, I was saying, "Young singers, experienced directors." And you remember, Rosenstock conducted here, in Spring Opera; he was an experienced man. That was my slogan: "Expose the young singers to experienced conductors and stage directors."

Of course, I'll tell you one stage director who, in my opinion, did fabulous work for Spring Opera: Jerry Freedman. He found his own there, and he really did some performances. I think he did both the Saint Matthew's Passion as well as the Death in Venice, and others. I remember he did one work once where I sat in the dress rehearsal--and I must have not seen too many rehearsals; maybe I wasn't here during the rehearsal period. I thought it just didn't work, his ideas. After that dress rehearsal--they had two dress rehearsals at that time--we sat, and I talked to him. And he sensed that something was wrong with his project. He really changed the look and partly also the direction, entirely. And it came out all right.

There you see, if I wouldn't have said anything, and would have swallowed my bad feeling about this, it may have gone to the public, and I am sure it would have been a complete failure.

Jerry sat and looked at me, and I noticed that he had also a feeling after what he had seen, that this was wrong. So we talked it over, and he came with a different approach, and it worked. Who else worked in Spring Opera? Do you have names?

Pfaff: Yes. In the beginning, Kritz.

Adler: Oh, Karl Kritz was an assistant conductor in San Francisco Opera who had been here already under Merola. He came, I think, a year later than I came, in '43 or '44. Kritz was a very experienced man, who worked also at the Metropolitan. I think that the young singers probably learned a great deal from him. He was a very experienced man, and they had much to learn.

Pfaff: I noticed in the earlier days there's lots of Kritz, Rosenstock, and a little bit of Jan Popper.

Adler: I don't know if I am free to talk about my impression of Jan Popper in Spring Opera. I had the highest regard for Jan, whom I knew from his work at the universities, where he did an excellent job, an excellent job.

When he came and conducted Spring Opera, I have the feeling that he used an approach which might have been the right approach for students, both on the stage and in the orchestra, but which was not entirely right for the young professionals in Spring Opera. He was, therefore, not at his very best in Spring Opera. I've seen him do outstanding performances in Stanford, really far above university level. But in Spring Opera, somehow, he wasn't quite right. I don't know whether he had worked too long on a nonprofessional basis, or what.

I still have the highest esteem for him. I saw him last when I ran into him in Tokyo on a Japanese holiday, in the midst of really millions of people. He had just come from Taiwan, and I had come from Shanghai. [He] was going the other direction from a temple. I saw him over there, and I screamed. He heard me scream, and didn't know where it came from, and so I went after him. No, I have very great respect for Jan, but Spring Opera wasn't his meat.

Pfaff: Another name that comes up frequently is Grossman.

Adler: Herbert Grossman was a very talented conductor who had also conducted Western Opera Theater. I must say the one performance I remember especially which he did well was The Turn of the Screw. We did Turn of the Screw in the opera house; it was not in the Curran. And he made those thirteen musicians really sound in the opera house so that it was really enough for this large house.

Pfaff: What was your reason for taking that one into the opera house?

Adler: Well, I wanted to do Turn of the Screw, and I think at that time we were still working in the opera house. I mean, I have done a lot of Britten, if you think back, except for Gloriana. I did most of them.

You see, there is one thing. For instance, the Midsummer Night's Dream, which I did in the fall season with the San Francisco Opera Company, I think it might have been better to do it with Spring Opera, although the Curran stage is not quite adequate for the needs of Midsummer Night's Dream. But the talent: I think that would be very nice with the young singers. Although nobody was better than Geraint Evans's Bottom could be! It was unforgettable to me. Mary Costa's Titania.

I saw somewhere--I think Opera News--Mary Costa was singing Merry Widow somewhere, I think in Tucson or somewhere. It must be Mary Costa; it was a "Costa." She lives in Washington. I saw her there some time ago, and she told me that she was working on her voice, and thought she would try a comeback. I'm only surprised that she would do it with Merry Widow. I conducted Merry Widow

with her in Central City shortly before she didn't sing so much anymore (not to use the word "retired").

An Invitation from Herbert von Karajan

Pfaff: One story that has come up that I want to pursue before we get away from it; about the same time that Spring Opera started. You said that you were approached by people in Vienna to come to the opera company there.

Adler: Well, not by "people." I was approach by Karajan. Karajan was a colleague of mine at the Music Academy in Vienna. We had been in touch, on and off, during the twenties. When I traveled, Karajan and I usually met, and we had long sessions, had dinner together, and then talked and talked. And he had great--I may say--respect, or agreed with what I said. For instance, he used [Paul] Hager also, and he had problems with Hager in Vienna, because Hager didn't fit into Vienna. He was very unpopular both with the administration and with personnel. But he seemingly did good service for Karajan, and so he upheld him. That was at the same time Hager was working for me.

Anyhow Karajan got into difficulties with unions, and he got fed up that he had to do too much administration, which he didn't like to do that much, and didn't do enough artistic work, and finally he asked me to come to Vienna. He had--I don't know if his title was director--but Walter Erich Schaefer, who was Intendant from Stuttgart, who was a friend both of Karajan's and of mine and of Hager's, Karajan borrowed him from Stuttgart for a while. Schaefer had to go home, and he [Karajan] had no director but me in mind at that time.

I said, "Look, I would come. I'm afraid I wouldn't last in Vienna. Nobody lasts in Vienna as opera director, that's a historical fact. But I would like to see if someone who is close to you and understands what you want artistically, if one can make it possible for you to do artistically what you have in mind. But I need a year in San Francisco to finish certain projects which I just don't want to give up in the stage they are."

Then I told Mr. Miller about this, and he agreed. Then the Vienna government gave Karajan an ultimatum that he had to have an opera director, and I didn't see my way [to go]. I thought, "Yes, a year from when we had talked; that's what I was aiming for. I would do it." That was '62-'63.

So he put his worst enemy into the position of opera director [Egon Hilbert]. He thought that this man would have taken care of himself by the time I was ready to come. Well, what happened was that this man pushed Karajan out. History shows that he conducted the Vienna Opera for about ten years. So I stayed.

Pfaff: I'm curious, what were the projects that were holding you here?

Adler: I don't remember really; it may have been Spring Opera, for instance. At that time it just had started. And there was development of artists; there was development of the technical apparatus. The San Francisco Opera needed a great deal of attention. As did the chorus, which had been very good, and then went down somehow, and fortunately is good again.

There were all kinds of facets of the operation and probably also the public: my contact and relationships with the people of the city. Not only city administration, I mean, but also people who were supporting [us].

Pfaff: What was your feeling about this Vienna Opera? Were you really tantalized by it and wanting it, or--

Adler: Well, I'll tell you something. When you are born in Vienna and grew up in the Vienna Opera, obviously it is a great temptation. I mean, if you look at the history of Vienna Opera directors, you'll see that they all failed. Even a man like Mahler, who did wonderful things. But then he failed in his relationship with the people he had to have a relationship with. And the Viennese are a funny crowd, you know. They would love him one day and they will hate him the next day.

We just saw it again with Lorin Maazel, who couldn't make his way in the Vienna Opera.

The opera situation in Vienna has always been a critical one politically. And I don't mean only politics in the parliament and whatnot; politics with the media was very difficult. But somehow the Vienna Opera was strong enough to survive all this.

But I had the feeling already in the early sixties that probably if I wouldn't make too many mistakes I could stay here as long as I wished and do things that I had on my mind. I was drawn to Vienna because of my being from there, having grown up in the Vienna Opera as a student, in the Imperial Box, and so on. And I liked Karajan, and I believed in Karajan. But I had the feeling that career-wise, it might be a big mistake.

Herbert von Karajan's Artistry and Temperament

Pfaff: Had you ever approached Karajan about coming to San Francisco?

Adler: We had talked about it. But somehow, in those years, I think he would not have been happy with the orchestra. He doesn't like to rehearse anymore now, but then he has been so long with Berlin and Vienna that they know exactly what he wants in a few rehearsals. But at that time, I got scared, inviting him.

Pfaff: I think the experience of the Met bears you out.

Adler: So it does. You know, he was in Vancouver once, Karajan, in his early days, [with] the symphony. They had Liszt's Les Preludes on the program. It starts on the third beat with the pizzicato, a slower movement, and hardly anybody attacked. He did this two times or three times; it just didn't work. So he gave up, and he gave a big beat. He conducted, but then never came back. He can do such things; he can be temperamental.

I remember a performance of Tosca in Vienna. He had a habit of going very fast, and he started out very quickly. He hadn't looked at the orchestra before he started to conduct, and the sound that came was not at all what he expected. He looked up, and there were mostly substitutes. The Vienna Philharmonic, which is also mainly the opera orchestra, was traveling, and he had not been notified or didn't remember--I don't know. But there he was, and so he put his left arm on the railing and he just marked the whole evening, because he had the feeling he wouldn't get anywhere.

There was, in this performance, a very beautiful soprano, an Italian soprano who was also painting. It was Tosca, and they had never met, and never rehearsed. I remember I was with him before the second act, and I said, "You know, Herbert, this girl needs your help."

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Adler: Karajan was always interested in my casting. He thought that I was casting well, and it was one of the reasons he wanted me to come to Vienna. He has taken over a number of sopranos whom I had here, like Leontyne Price for one. And Anna Tomowa-Sintow.

Pfaff: You had her first?

Adler: Oh sure. I talked to him about her.

Pfaff: He monopolizes her time now. [laughing]

Adler: He surely does. I told you the story that Price always had three photographs on her dressing-room table when she performed. One was Karajan, who was the emperor. One was Bing, who was the king. And one was I, who was the president. Actually, she may bring this up in her book, but I can't find it now.

But he liked the repertoire here, and he liked the casting, and besides, our long, friendly relationship interested him in my coming to Vienna, to do those things with him. Especially my success with unions.

Karl Böhm, Josef Krips, Erich Kleiber and Otto Klemperer

Adler: My experiences sitting in the office of directors at the Vienna Opera are very strong memories. In my young days it was Franz Schalk, and then Clemens Krauss, then much later, after the war, Karajan and [Karl] Böhm. I remember at a performance of Die Frau ohne Schatten in Vienna. Böhm had been at the Met. He was director of Vienna at that time and people in Vienna objected to his being at the Met so long, so when he came to the stand, the people booed. And some screamed, "Bravo Krauss!" It was for Clemens Krauss who was not in Vienna--I think he was dead at the time. He died in Mexico City. I don't know if it was a concert or a rehearsal. He couldn't take the altitude. But I sat with Böhm after that, before the beginning of the next act. He was heartbroken. I couldn't understand it, with a man like Karl Böhm, who was influenced so badly by a superficial expression of an audience. It was very, very interesting.

Pfaff: What kind of man was he? He's hard for the public to read. He seems very remote to the public.

Adler: He was a difficult man. He was very vain. He needed recognition, which in my book he deserved. When something didn't quite go his way, he was not very pleasant. I remember him in his young days, when he came as a guest conductor with great success. And then, as I just said, when he was director.

You know, I'm very sorry that Josef Krips didn't conduct opera here. It was not acceptable in those days to have the San Francisco Symphony conductor conduct the opera at the same time. I think we talked about that regarding Monteux, who conducted for the opera as soon as he stepped down from the symphony.

Krips was really a very stimulating and interesting opera conductor, especially with Mozart, which he did very well. He was quite successful with Beethoven in Vienna, too, typically Viennese.

You know, there are no things about which one can say, "There is only one way." But when we decide on a way, or on an aim, we must stick to it, and try to put it over. I think that's the way I worked., at the same time realizing there were other ways, too.

Pfaff: This tradition of the San Francisco Symphony conductor not conducting at the opera--was that a tradition established on their side? Did you ever approach Krips about conducting?

Adler: No. We may have talked about it. It just was a law. I wasn't breaking laws; I was only enforcing laws.

I want to make one connection with something--the other day, two days ago or so--I was at the opera house, and I ran into the chorus director while I was getting parked.

Pfaff: Richard Bradshaw?

Adler: I didn't know the fellow was to assign a parking place to me, and I said to him, "Well, I would rather be there." So Bradshaw says to me, "Causing trouble again?" And I said, "Always." But I think when you have a mind and you have a will, and you deal with people--I didn't surround myself with people who said, "Yes." I think that you always will run into certain frictions. It is just a question of how to handle the frictions. And I think that probably what many said about me, that I can be terrible, then within an hour, the nicest guy, is true. Because if I want something and I can't get it, then I totally am after it, regardless whether my partners like it or not.

Pfaff: Did you hear or know Kleiber?

Adler: I heard father Kleiber, Erich Kleiber, in Vienna.

There was in Vienna, on consecutive days, a symphony concert with the Berlin Philharmonic under Kleiber, and the same program was given the next day by the Vienna Philharmonic under Bruno Walter. The Berlin concert was probably more precise than the Vienna Philharmonic. But there was something about the sound; the way of playing and phrasing of the Vienna Orchestra which is so great, one couldn't resist it.

But of those old-time conductors, I heard Klemperer and Leo Blech of Berlin--

Pfaff: Did you ever hear Klemperer in opera?

Adler: You know after the recording of Figaro that he did, he gave a concert performance of Figaro, in which, incidentally, Margaret Price sang both the Susanna and the Cherubino. And Klemperer was already in rather bad shape. It was Geraint Evans who gave the-- not to say the beat--but the tone at the performance, the concert performance of the Marriage of Figaro in the Festival Hall. I also heard Klemperer conduct The Magic Flute in Covent Garden. He insisted on the German Magic Flute. The dialogue, with the English-speaking audience, as well as the text of the opera, just doesn't work. The only one who laughed loudly all the time was Klemperer. He had a wonderful time, but it was an awful performance, if you ask me. But he had a wonderful time. Laughed his head off.

Pfaff: I remember the first time I saw his recording of Figaro, I thought, "I have to have this." It just seemed like an ideal cast. But it's so slow that no one can really shine.

Adler: Yes. Of course there is one thing: Tempi in Europe were slower. Klemperer at that time was probably still slower than the slow tempi which were customary. But I still find when I come to Europe that in most cases tempi are much slower than would be expected.

I talked to Levine about this. When he came to Europe, he heard so many European performances, which were all much slower than he had done. I think he slowed down, perhaps at times too much for American standards and tastes.

Memories of Richard Strauss and Hans Knappertsbusch

Adler: Strauss conducted in the opera house, some Mozart, especially Così fan tutte--he loved to conduct Così fan tutte. Figaro, Fidelio, Lohengrin, Tristan, Der Barbier von Bagdad, which is a Cornelius opera, which incidentally Jimmy Schwabacher sang in. What else did he conduct? Of his operas, Elektra and Salome. He conducted Rosenkavalier, but he himself said, "Schalk has conducted Rosenkavalier much better than I." They were co-directors at that time.

Did I tell you the Knappertsbusch story with the Vienna Philharmonic?

Pfaff: No.

Adler: He was doing the Haydn Variations by Brahms. And he said to the orchestra, "You don't have to rehearse the Variations." They said, "Oh, please, let's do it." One problem is that in some variations the repeats are made and in others they aren't. Well, so comes the evening, and Knappertsbusch, who didn't always conduct from memory, didn't look. And he, instead of repeating, went on. Except for a couple of players, they all jumped in and went on. He realized that he had forgotten to make the repeat which he had intended to do. When he was through, he said, "That happens when you rehearse."

I have another famous Knappertsbusch story. There was a conductor at the Vienna Opera who followed the Nazis early on. He was already a Nazi by the time he conducted Tristan [one evening]. The next morning in the foyer, he was going around proudly, and he said to Knappertsbusch, "Did you hear my Tristan?" Knappertsbusch replied, "Oh, did you write one, too?"

Pfaff: Did you hear Knappertsbusch conduct?

Adler: Yes, sure.

Pfaff: Did you ever hear his Parsifal?

Adler: No. But he was always half an hour longer or an hour longer than anyone else.

Pfaff: It didn't seem longer at the time.

Adler: He was amazing. Knappertsbusch was one who didn't like applause when he came to the stand. I remember a performance of Die Meistersinger in Munich where he gave the downbeat to the second act as he entered from the left side, near the timpani there. The orchestra started; he wasn't even there yet. They knew he was making jokes. He was a man of great humor.

VIII THE UNIONS

[Interview 8: March 15, 1985] ##

American Guild of Musical Artists and Union Negotiations in Chicago

Pfaff: What were your experiences with labor unions prior to coming to San Francisco?

Adler: In the years I used to work in Europe, the labor unions were not only in existence but quite strong. You grew up with them and you knew about them. My uncle was the head of the Social Democratic Party, so my mind may have been susceptible to union matters.

But in Chicago in 1940, two years after I got there, I found myself negotiating contracts--at least participating in chorus negotiations with AGMA (American Guild of Musical Artists). Before 1940 there was a choral union, both in Chicago and at the Metropolitan. In Chicago we broke with this choral union, and that was when the famous 1940 chorus was formed and engaged hundreds of young singers, beautiful young voices, beautiful looking young people, before the war. Among the ninety-two regular members there were only seventeen who had belonged to the choral union in Chicago before 1940. All the others were new. And everybody had to become a member of the American Guild of Musical Artists.

I remember the union representative at that time was Mrs. Herbert [Blanche] Witherspoon, who was the widow of Met impresario Herbert Witherspoon. She had been sitting on the other side of the table before, but somehow we got along, and she was very helpful in our negotiations with the Los Angeles Opera Guild later on. She was working on the artistic side at UCLA, and she became quite attached to the Merola Opera Program. I think she is not so active anymore, if I am not mistaken.

After 1940, I always got involved in union negotiations, although at that time it really wasn't part of my engagement. But I seemed to have done fairly well, I believe, with the union negotiations, as in many things. In artistic matters you need a lot of patience, and you have to understand the people with whom you are negotiating and think of the people for whom they negotiate.

Psychology is important. Patience--you have to listen to lots and lots of oratory, because everybody who participates in negotiations wants to talk, so there is an enormous waste of time on account of the waste of words. This is not easy, but you learn it, and of course I had the privilege to be the director of the San Francisco Opera for many years and to work with the same union representatives for many years. So there develops a relationship of trust--friendship, almost.

I remember there was a labor expert who was sitting in on a union meeting during negotiations. I finally lost my patience, and I said, "I'm sorry, I will not continue negotiations as long as this gentleman participates." I called the head of the union in New York that night and I said to him, "You'd better come here because I will not continue negotiating. It's not the way we have been doing things here."

Now, as it was, we had interrupted the negotiations and it was the opening of the baseball season, so I got tickets for the opening. I went, and who sits across the aisle from me, in the same row, but this gentleman who I more or less tried to throw out! Well, after that we became much more friendly, and now we are very good friends. So you see how it goes.

But you have to give. Unions know this, and the employer has to know this. It's only a question how far and when. Originally, union contracts were for one year, which is an enormous waste of time and probably also money. I succeeded getting longer contracts; I believe it was even up to four or five years. I'm not quite sure of that.

Pfaff: Was that all here, in San Francisco?

Adler: Yes. I worked in Chicago from 1938 through '42, then in San Francisco from 1943 to 1981. So my knowledge of unions is based on the local situation.

Pfaff: So when you were in Chicago were you active in the negotiations, or were you observing?

Adler: No, no, no. In Chicago, I was chorus director and conductor. I was active in those two fields. I don't remember having participated in orchestra negotiations, but with AGMA, I did.

I believe that if you work with people, you do better if you are able to work with them on friendly terms. It has been said, for instance, that Toscanini considered every orchestra musician as his enemy and that he had to overcome in each rehearsal a hundred enemies--he had to be victor over a hundred enemies. Well, I don't really believe that this was truly the mentality of the maestro, but I certainly believe that when you are on friendly terms with soloists, chorus, orchestra, stagehands, you are in a better position to bring out the best in each person than when you force them.

One still needs a strong will, and some people objected to my strong will. But I think I had a strong will and strong aims and the belief that only the best was good enough for the San Francisco Opera, and I think that the San Francisco Opera profited from that.

Weak people [can't] run an opera company, because from the top artists to the last supernumeraries, you are dealing with individuals. They all know better what they should do than you do, or they think so, and to overcome this you have to have a fairly strong opinion and have a strong hand to put it over.

The American Federation of Musicians, Local 6: Unions in San Francisco

Pfaff: What was the situation in terms of the labor unions and their relationships with the company when you arrived here? In other words, what kind of negotiator was Merola?

Adler: I don't know. It was a rather loose situation, if I remember right. I really don't remember in the first years what it was like, but as I told you the other day, the discipline, for instance, of the chorus was nonexistent. They were coming and going, attending, not attending; nobody said a word.

Merola was very popular with the chorus, and the entire operation was based on this popular man from Naples. He was a real Neapolitan in every sense of the word, in the good sense and in the bad sense. But he was charming, and with his charm he could overcome many obstacles. I don't remember much about the union situation during that time, but they grew and grew, as unions everywhere grew. I came in '43, so in the forties and fifties the

positions of professional union people, and with them the duties, the efforts and power of union representatives, grew.

Pfaff: How many kinds of unions did you have to deal with as director of the company?

Adler: Oh, the American Guild of Musical Artists, which represents soloists, chorus, ballet, stage directors. There is the Musicians Union, which represents orchestra and then, later, also assistant conductors and, to some degree, conductors. Sometimes they represent conductors, sometimes they fight conductors. I remember a situation where one president of the Local 6 of the Musicians Union came to me and said, "If you engage this conductor again, the orchestra will walk out." In that case, I could not defend the conductor because I thought he had been entirely wrong in the treatment of some musicians. If someone is wrong and unfair, I won't defend him.

In spite of my very friendly relationship with the Musicians Union, once some musicians felt that I had insulted a section of the orchestra, which certainly had not been my intent. I don't know if I did or didn't, but the union president kept the orchestra out of the pit on the evening of a performance.

I wouldn't give in; I was in my office upstairs and he was downstairs in the musicians' room. I asked him to come up and he did. On the way to my office my secretary, who was very good at such things, made some joke, and gave him a cup of coffee and he came in. And I said to him, "Look, the first thing is that we keep the public away from our differences. That is not something that you or I should let the public suffer for." So finally the musicians went in, and we started talking and we found a solution--as we always did. At times, though, the union protects members for one reason or another who artistically should not be protected, and there I had some problems.

No employer can dismiss orchestra or chorus members at will, and I really did this only when I had artistic reasons. But there were cases where I lost. In one case a musician had been out of the orchestra for ten years, and I had originally engaged him for the second stand of the section, not as the principal.

The principal chair was open and he wanted it, but I said, "Look, I don't know if this is a good idea. You were out for ten years." He said, "Let's try it for one year. I would never stay in an organization where I am not wanted." It didn't work, and I told him after one season that I was sorry, but it was a mistake. He started fighting and fought me for years and I was unable to get rid of him. So sometimes you get caught, you know.

I think in order to negotiate successfully with the unions, you must be very familiar with the operation. If you know exactly what is involved, then the union people have respect for you and will understand when you cannot give in or can give in. People who sit in offices and don't participate in the practical operations of an opera company cannot be entirely familiar with the needs of the company. Sure, they can calculate dollars and cents, but that is not everything, and dollars and cents are very much dictated by working conditions. If you have adverse working conditions, it can cost you a very good piece of money.

The same is true artistically, in limiting working hours. If you don't understand how many working hours a day or a week you need, it is difficult to come to results which are practical for the operation.

Pfaff: We were going through the list of the kinds of unions that you had, and you mentioned AGMA and the Musicians Union. What other unions were there?

Adler: Stagehands, which is a very important union, because we engage a great number of stagehands. [The International Association of Theatrical Stage Employees]

Pfaff: For example, how many?

Adler: Depends. Usually a local will ask from an employer a certain minimum. I didn't have this for a long time, because when we had the big shows, I employed much larger numbers than other employers in San Francisco. So they didn't insist on minimums. They knew that I would not ask more from a man than he could do. You see, that is another thing. If the union is aware of the fact that you don't abuse a person, then it's better. That took me some years to learn.

Anyhow, the stagehands union, the wig and makeup union. Those were always difficult negotiations, because their local was not in San Francisco but in Los Angeles. They tried to do the best for their union members, but they didn't know the local situation in San Francisco, so negotiations were not easy. As a matter of fact, if I am not mistaken, the last years I refused to meet with their people and delegated that to someone, because it was really too much to work with people who never came to find out what was what.

Designers and Their Union

Adler: Then there is the box office union. The designer's union. That union didn't allow you to use foreign designers, designers who were not citizens, and who didn't belong to the local, so you had to engage someone as a local cover. If you wanted to engage a gentleman from England, for instance, who was not a member of the American union, you would have to engage an American designer who was a member of the union too.

Pfaff: Are we talking in this case about a production designer?

Adler: Yes. What did you mean?

Pfaff: Well, I didn't know exactly what kind of designer you meant. You mean somebody who actually was like a Ponnelle.

Adler: Well, yes. Of course there are designers who design only scenery, and others design only costumes. You can have difficulties with designers who don't deliver technical designs, but only pictures for the scenery. They may be wonderful painters, but I know that in Italy it is a custom that the technical designs are frequently made by the technical director of an opera company, so Italian designers deliver only pictures.

Here it is different. The technical director is not necessarily the one who has to make a production work, although at times this is necessary. For instance, Ponnelle, since you mentioned him, delivered to us [detailed] technical designs and the designs for Lear, Reimann's Lear are among the most technically difficult I have ever heard of in this theater. Our technical director worked them out with much work and great skill, and Ponnelle was pleased and admired them when they came out.

But at the same time we had other productions--mainly of Italian designers--which looked beautiful in the sketches, but when one asked them, "Well, how do you come to this?", they didn't know. Sometimes we really didn't find the solutions, and I think there are some productions in the repertoire which I never quite understood. The result is that you don't get the same effect that you see in the painting. But that is the Italian tradition, that the designer delivers [only] pictures.

For instance, a man I much admire is Zeffirelli, and when he did Antony and Cleopatra for the opening of the new Met, he was unable to manage the weight that the revolving stage could take, and it broke before the opening.

Zeffirelli and I often talked, but we never succeeded in coming to an agreement. He is very expensive, demands a lot of time, and is not often available. So it's very difficult to come to terms with him, but I admire him very much. If we think of the second act of Bohème, for instance, which is on two levels, he had better know what he is doing!

Pfaff: Any other unions you can think of, any other kinds of unions?

Adler: No. There are in other opera houses unions for supernumeraries, but not here. In some theaters the ushers had unions, which we did not have.

The Opera Staff and Unions

Pfaff: And the administrative staff had no union?

Adler: No. The administrative staff had no union, and we always managed quite well. I had a secretary who complained to the legal office, or whatever it is, and we had some guys come over and talk to me and investigate the situation once. Out of it came a regulation which was superfluous, frankly, because we had already put it into effect.

Oh, yes! I had to deal with the press department. They had a union, and I had to deal with them at times, especially those from New York who worked on Broadway. So they are in the union and we must make some arrangement with them, you know? At times we had to have a contract, but at other times it was sufficient to tell them what we were doing. They don't necessarily like to sit for weeks or days and argue about a contract either.

The Met has more unions than we do, but I don't know what all the others are. They have administrative unions.

Pfaff: Can you think of any times when union negotiations became very touchy and difficult for the company prior to the 1961 season?

Adler: No, not that I recall. There were two times--if I'm not mistaken once with AGMA and once with the musicians--when we didn't have a contract at the time of the opening and they would use this. They would say, well, they wouldn't work without a contract. My position was to make every effort not to lose a season, not to be dark for a year. This idea that some people have, that after a year you may have a better situation for the employer, I did not share-- especially when you have short seasons, as the San

Francisco Opera had. Earlier there was nothing but the fall season which, when I took over, was five weeks. Then we went up to six, and then to seven--and we had to come out of nowhere with a new season every year. So the continuity artistically is very important.

I believe also that continuity with your public is very important. The largest part of the public will not care how you succeed in handling issues. They pay their money and they want the best possible performances. Whether you fight with the union or not doesn't matter too much to them. They don't understand, and I don't think it's their business, really. But if we would have cancelled the season, we would have lost a lot of subscribers and other public. And, in the long run, it may have cost more than we were arguing about with the union.

I took this position at all times. I remember once when it was really touch and go, and the board president and the lawyer and I sat in the mayor's office while he was talking--

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Adler: --to the unions. I talked to the lawyer and to the president, and I tried to defend my position. I convinced the lawyer, and the lawyer convinced the president, and thereafter much more was left to the lawyer and me. The lawyer still says to me, "I remember with pleasure what I learned from you." He says, "Well, when you retire, you'd better join the labor department of our firm. For each contract you win, you get an extra window, because it is a sign of esteem in the lawyer's office."

A Crisis with AGMA: 1972

Adler: But it is very time-consuming. I think I mentioned that when I was in Russia in 1972 I had to return suddenly for labor negotiations here. It was after the Russian minister of culture came here for a visit. She invited my wife and me to come over there, and we really didn't want to go as guests of the Russian government, so we made arrangements through Intourist. We were traveling in Europe and finally in Rome, I remember, we got a Russian visa. Then we flew to Moscow from Zurich, and we asked for a guide.

Everything went very easily, very fast, and on the way to the city I noticed that the car I had ordered was a government car, and the girl who was the guide was not an Intourist guide, she was a government guide. The minister of culture, Madame Fuerstenau, who

was really quite a woman, had known that we were coming and had changed our hotel. So the guide said to me on the trip into the city, "You will find that we are going to another hotel; I've changed your hotel reservations." We went first to Moscow and then Leningrad, and the guide went with us.

But there were union negotiations in San Francisco at that time, and every night I talked to San Francisco, and tried to run the union negotiations from Leningrad. In Russia, you have to tell the telephone operator how long you want to talk. One night I said to her, "I need 'x' minutes, and then I want to be able to talk ten more minutes if needed." Well the ten minutes were not allowed. She wouldn't give me more, and suddenly, CLUNK! That's when I told my wife, "I'm very sorry; we have to leave. I cannot risk the union situation in San Francisco."

So we left the next morning. We flew via Copenhagen to Zurich, where you can talk as long as you wish, and as freely as you wish. We went from Zurich to Stuttgart a couple of days later, and I remember we were in Stuttgart a couple of days and then we were supposed to go to Geneva, but that morning at 7 o'clock I had a phone call from San Francisco, and they told me that the union negotiations were about to break down; they were at a standstill. Could I come?

So I said, "OK, I'll be home tonight." Instead of going to Geneva at 11 o'clock--that was 7:15--I took a flight at 8 o'clock to London, and from there to San Francisco. We got here in the late afternoon. There were union negotiations in the evening; they started at 6:30 and lasted the whole night, and I was the only one who was awake. In the morning, at 6:30 I think, I had a contract.

Pfaff: Which union was this with?

Adler: It was AGMA. I had also night sessions with Musicians Union people, and I remember one session when I offered them my office. I took the negotiating team in and the chief representative sat down. I said, "You sit in my chair at the desk and run this meeting, yes?" When he sat down before the meeting, he turned around and said, "Wouldn't you like to keep this chair?"

But I believe that unions are a necessity and that it is the duty of whoever represents the company to establish relationships and conditions which are advantageous to both sides, let's put it this way.

The stagehands union had the reputation for being the most difficult to deal with but I wouldn't say so. The head of the stagehands union and I respected each other. He was a former

stagehand, Eddie Powell, and he felt that I was fair. If he came with something that I really felt the company could not live with, I told him so, and he showed some understanding. He didn't always give; we had our arguments. But basically, it was a relationship of great respect. They invited me for lunch after I quit.

I think one important thing is that you cannot deal with unions only when contracts are about to expire. I was in touch with unions continuously. They reported problems. I reported what was good. I showed my understanding for individuals when needed. But if you see unions only when the contract expires, no good.

Pfaff: So in what ways did you keep up contacts, besides making reports?

Adler: We met at lunch, for instance. We had meetings. I agreed to meet about very silly things, just to be in contact. And they knew this. They are not fools.

The 1961 AGMA Strike

Pfaff: Bloomfield does say one thing about the 1961 AGMA strike. That was the one that was going on in April, when you were about to announce the season. It wasn't the one at the opening, but it was at the announcement time. And what he says without backing it up too much is that after negotiations stalemated, Mayor Christopher was brought in to settle it. Do you remember it that way?

Adler: I remember we were in Christopher's office and the feeling was at that time, and that I remember clearly, that we shouldn't announce the season, because not I but my superiors wanted to threaten the union that we wouldn't have a season unless they gave in.

I never believed in this, but obviously I was engaged by the company and had to take the position of the company, even if I thought it wrong. That's why I waited to announce the season until everything was settled. I don't think that the union believed for a moment in April that we would not have a season in September.

The other time it was drawn out until the opening day. If you go that far, the union may think, "Oh, we may lose a week or two or three of the season." That is more costly to the employer than what the unions want, always. It's a very intricate thing, but let me repeat that when you are as long in a position as I was, you can manage.

Pfaff: What kind of a negotiator or arbitrator was Mayor Christopher? How well do you remember his part in those negotiations?

Adler: He was very popular with unions also. He was very understanding and cooperative, and he tried to bring the parties together. He was a very friendly man.

Obviously a mayor of San Francisco, especially as the years progressed, would not have wanted to see the city without opera. The opera was an important part of the culture, the social life and the business life of the city. The city of San Francisco was one of the first, if not the first cities, that gave subsidies to the arts.

Robert Watt Miller and Labor Negotiations

Pfaff: How did it work when you and President Miller were both working on labor negotiations? Did you work together, or did you work independently?

Adler: Oh, he didn't work on labor negotiations.

Pfaff: That's what I was wondering. He appears in all the stories, but I couldn't tell if he was an active negotiator.

Adler: He was an extremely bright man, a great gentleman, and he knew a lot about opera. But again, he did not know the details. He saw the end result of the work from the house, but he also spent a lot of time backstage.

I remember once when I was negotiating in my office on some union matter and he passed in the hall, opened the door and came in. He was a very tall and very elegant man, and he made one of his famous statements, you know, that ruined everything that I had achieved, so I had to start again. But he wasn't involved in those things. I don't think it is the business of the president of the company.

I greatly admired Mr. Miller, I had the greatest respect for him, and I appreciated the fact that he had put me in my position. But I appreciated also the fact that he left me alone. Naturally, when it came to the question whether there should be a season or not--then naturally he had to be the one who had to agree and to say so to me and give me the order.

When I took over the company, I said to Mr. Miller, "When I run things, I will be a good soldier, and I will obey orders, but I am not a person who will accept not saying what I think." And that's the way we handled it. Very soon there were no orders any more, because there was confidence that I was doing the right thing for the company. That's the way the San Francisco Opera worked when Mr. Miller was alive and I ran the company. When I needed Mr. Miller, he was available to me.

Mr. Miller and Das Rheingold: 1967

Adler: Did I tell you, as long as we are talking about this, about the intermission in Rheingold?

Pfaff: No. An intermission in Rheingold?

Adler: Rheingold had not been in San Francisco since I was here--until 1967. And Mr. Miller said, to my great surprise, "Of course you are going to do it with an intermission." I said, "What? I never heard of an intermission." He said, "Sure, we can have an intermission if we decide to."

So we talked, and the conductor was against it, the stage director was against it, I was against it. Mr. Miller had a very strong position there, and finally I said to him, "I'll tell you something, Mr. Miller. I am going to a rehearsal this afternoon, and I will look and see if I think an intermission is possible." Well, I sat there, and my reaction was definitely no. No intermission was possible.

So in the evening, Leopold Ludwig, Paul Hager and I met in my office. We were in agreement that an intermission was impossible, but we all respected Mr. Miller greatly and we all were looking for a way not to hurt his feelings by bypassing his opinion.

It was about 11:30. Suddenly the door opened to my office, and Mr. Miller, in a black tuxedo and bow tie, walked in saying, "I had the feeling I was needed here." I said, "Both the stage director and the conductor agree with me that it really is not advantageous to have an intermission." He thought for a moment, and he said, "All right. I don't agree with you, but who am I to force an action upon my general director, the conductor and the stage director?" We said, "Thank you very much," and we played it without an intermission, and it was an incredible success. I have never heard a bigger success for Rheingold, anywhere, at any time.

After a performance, when it was a very successful evening, Mr. Miller had the habit of putting his arm on mine, so we were marching--I had to take many steps when he took one--across the stage back and forth. I said, "Well, I am delighted that it was such a success, for the company and for you and for us." He turned to me and he said, "I imagine what success this would have been if you had had an intermission!" [chuckles] I'll never forget it; this was Mr. Miller. And he didn't mean it. I mention this to show you a little bit about the relationship between the president and me, as general director, and the high-ranking members of the artistic staff.

Two Major Commissions: Blood Moon (1961) and Angle of Repose (1976)

Pfaff: Let's move on to your first commission. When the 1961 season did get underway, one of the things that it featured was the [Norman] Dello Joio Blood Moon.

Adler: It was a commission to match Ford Foundation money. The problem was that Norman tried to accommodate everybody's wishes. And when he put in a voodoo scene without any sense or reason, he thought he was doing Mary Costa a service, you know? Also, he didn't get along with the fellow who wrote the libretto [Gale Hoffman]. He finally finished it himself.

Norman at that time was able to write very well, otherwise I wouldn't have selected him. But what came out was not concise. It was a beautiful production, though, and Ter-Arutunian designed the sets--very beautiful sets--and lovely costumes.

You asked me if it was published, and I would think not, because it's very, very difficult to find a publisher who will print music before a world premiere. Because who knows? Maybe it will never be used--and so it was. It was never given again.

Pfaff: How does one go about commissioning a work, as opposed to deciding to do one?

Adler: You commission a work if the composer comes with a libretto and it's a project that has your interest and deserves your support. Then you discuss with him how much money he wants, what the performance rights are for the first year and for future years--if he has a publisher, and many, many details.

Pfaff: In this case did Dello Joio come to you, or did you approach him first?

Adler: I don't remember. I knew some of his music. I think we met in New York, and he talked about his opera to me. But I know that while he was composing I got very worried and I mentioned it to him; I didn't hide it. I was right.

I didn't know if the librettist put those scenes in; I don't know if Dello Joio asked him for them. Anyhow they couldn't get along any more, and he changed it. There were problems with the libretto.

##

Pfaff: While we're on the subject of commissions, let's take Angle of Repose as an example. It was commissioned because of the U.S. bicentennial and I think the centennial of San Francisco, too. Did Mr. Imbrie come to you with the idea, or did you approach him?

Adler: I approached Imbrie, and he brought Angle of Repose. I certainly had heard a lot about Imbrie and knew some of his music, and it was appropriate at that moment to have a composer--I hate the word "local"--but a composer from here. I think that [Robert] Commanday may also have played a part in it--I could have asked Commanday, and Commanday certainly would have recommended Imbrie.

I believe that the result would have been completely different if Imbrie would have listened to the conductor and stage director. But he wouldn't listen; he wouldn't give in--especially in the last scene, which was much too long.¹ The public was also by no means with it. But I thought that many people knew the book, the novel, Angle of Repose, and that that would help. But it didn't.

Pfaff: How about with Blood Moon? Was the public more with that?

Adler: More so, because it was really a wonderful looking production. In my opinion it missed on the dramatic line that this libretto should have had. As I said, there were all kinds of approaches, scenes, and thoughts which didn't belong in it.

I also tried to get an opera from the Polish composer, Penderecki. I met with him a couple of times in Santa Fe where he was for Devils of Loudon, and you know what he wanted to compose for San Francisco? Arsenic and Old Lace. I had my doubts that this was really something that he should do, and I was glad that I

¹Angle of Respose is discussed on pp. 322-324.

didn't commission him, because you saw what happened to Paradise Lost in Chicago. They lost the opera! It took years before they could perform it, and then it was a terrible financial thing.

Pfaff: Did you see it?

Adler: Yes, I did.

Pfaff: What was your feeling about it?

Adler: I think I would have tried to produce it differently, if I remember right. There were some things which were really very, very good and interesting to me, but the way they presented it--somehow it didn't really catch me.

Pfaff: Musically or dramatically?

Adler: I don't remember. You cannot separate the two in opera anymore, especially in work like this.

Some American Premieres: Benjamin Britten in San Francisco

Adler: While I was at the opera, we performed over fifty contemporary works. There was the world premiere of Mechem here for the American Opera Project. We did Harbison's Winter's Tale.

Pfaff: It wasn't my understanding that those were commissions precisely; they were just premieres.

Adler: No. That's right.

Premieres, we had many, as you know. American premieres. We mentioned the Britten, Midsummer Night's Dream in 1961. Of course, Geraint Evans knew the Dream. He was wonderful.

Pfaff: Was that your first Benjamin Britten opera?

Adler: I think so. We did it before Grimes [1973]. Later we did Billy Budd in the opera house, and we did Death in Venice in the Spring Opera.

Pfaff: And Peter Grimes with both Jess Thomas and Jon Vickers.

Adler: First Vickers and then Jess Thomas, yes. You know, our Death in Venice was, according to the publisher, the best production of Death in Venice that he saw.

I was toying with Gloriana also. But the more I looked at the score and the whole thing, I felt it would have success only in Britain. The English National Opera brought it to New York, though. Was it successful?

Pfaff: It was an enormous success. I think that was at least half because Sarah Walker was singing the part of Queen Elizabeth and had a tremendous personal success in it. It got very strong reviews and a huge public turnout.

Joan Sutherland's Debut as Lucia: 1961

Pfaff: There was, that same season as Blood Moon, one other debut that I think we simply have to talk about, and that's Joan Sutherland as Lucia di Lammermoor.

Adler: I had heard her in Palermo. After the performance I had dinner with her and Rickie Bonyng, and they discussed details of the engagements and all that. And she said to me, "Did you hear me?" I said, "Yes, I heard you in Covent Garden as the First Lady in The Magic Flute." And she said, "Then you didn't hear me!" We are really very good friends still. I saw them in Australia last fall and had lunch at their house.

Did the performance take place and someone else sang or what?

Pfaff: [Reading from Bloomfield book] "Joan Sutherland was to have made her San Francisco debut at the opening, but a case of abscessed ears in Edinburgh delayed her arrival and Anna Moffo was flown in for the first performance, Sutherland taking the second and third. Sutherland's was of course the more mannered interpretation, but her coloratura command was unarguable. It brought down the house."

Adler: Yes. Now I remember it was Moffo. In 1960 Moffo sang in the [company's] first Sonnambula. Sonnambula is not my favorite opera. It's sometimes hard to stay awake, though it has some beautiful things in it.

Pfaff: Well, I wanted to continue with the Sutherland debut in Lucia.

Adler: She always had an enormous success. She always had success with the vast majority of the audiences, but there were critics who had to get used to her. She has, in recent years, a means of expression which she did not have before. Before she had a phenomenal voice and coloratura, although it was not as outspoken a

coloratura as Lily Pons had, for instance, but it was a much bigger voice. Pons never could have sung Esclarmonde, which Joan did.

She cancelled a season on me, which threw me very badly, I remember. I was in London, and it was fairly late when she cancelled the season. I don't know what the opera was, but I really was very, very upset.

I gave her the roles the Metropolitan didn't give her. She sang Fledermaus and The Merry Widow, and although it wasn't an absolute necessity to present her in those roles, she was very funny. She has been trying lately to sing more dramatic parts. Of course, Rickie Bonyngé conducted here at a time when he hadn't too many engagements.

##

Pfaff: It was certainly in the early days of his conducting that he conducted here. What about the story that Bloomfield tells regarding the Molinari-Pradelli incident?

Adler: That's a true story, I think.

Pfaff: Would you mind telling it for the tape recorder?

Adler: Well, I wasn't there, but Bonyngé was standing in the back of my box [during a rehearsal], and Molinari, who favored Italian artists, wasn't too flexible with artists he didn't like. So he didn't accompany the Mad Scene in Lucia the way it should have been. And Mr. Bonyngé, standing in my box, made a nasty remark which was overheard by others. Later on he wouldn't have made this remark, but it wasn't as important as the media made it out to be.

So I brought them together. I called a rehearsal, and I let them know that I was coming. Molinari could be very stubborn and didn't have entirely good manners. He was a very good conductor, but he was as a person a rather loose specimen.

Richard Bonyngé and Joan Sutherland

Pfaff: I am very interested in this combination, because it is a fairly unique one in opera, Bonyngé and Sutherland. I'm wondering what you can remember of the early days of negotiating with them, and what they were like individually and together.

Adler: She always pushed him as her conductor. At that time it was said, which I think is not true, that she wasn't so musical, and for that

reason, she wanted him. I think she acquired musicianship, and she certainly had the advantage that he studied the roles with her. He was entirely familiar with the phrasing and articulation and everything, and that gave her a certain feeling of security which she liked, and which I can fully understand.

Another coloratura, Lily Pons, had they let Kostelanetz conduct opera, she would have loved it, probably.

Pfaff: Andre Kostelanetz?

Adler: Yes, sure, he was her husband.

Pfaff: Oh, I didn't know!

Adler: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, there was a little coloratura who sang in the Chicago Opera, later. But nothing great became of her. She was at that time seventeen or eighteen and coached with me in Chicago. I was married, but the mother had the idea that we could become a second Kostelanetz-Pons team.

Pfaff: What are the two like as personalities? I understand that Sutherland is a very fun, light person.

Adler: She has a wonderful sense of humor. She laughs wonderfully. She's a very kind and simple person. She would sit with the chorus ladies when they didn't have something to do. She always does needlework and chats with the choral singers, so she was very popular everywhere. They have a fabulous house in Les Avants, Switzerland, above Montreux. An incredible house. It's on Lake Geneva, you know, Montreux, and this is in the mountains above. Fascinating place, with beautiful mountains around. You had the feeling you could grab them, they were so close. In the house she has memorabilia of the most incredible kind.

Pfaff: She has a reputation of being a bit of a practical joker. Were you ever witness to or victim of any of her practical jokes?

Adler: No, but I'm sure she is, because she has a wonderful sense of humor.

Pfaff: And what about Bonyngé, by comparison?

Adler: Bonyngé I think is an excellent conductor for elegant and light-type music--although I think he conducted Esclarmonde very well, which is more Wagnerian. He has a sense of phrasing which is very special. All those elegant dances, waltzes, unknown overtures which he has recorded. One doesn't know the music, but one always recognizes the Bonyngé style of conducting. He has quite an

enormous career which he didn't have in the beginning when he started here, and it was not easy for him, you know.

They are an interesting couple.

Pfaff: When it came to getting her as an artist, did you have to negotiate with him, or with her? Was he her agent?

Adler: No, no. She has the same agent as Schwarzkopf and the agent always pushed Bonyng, too. He conducts now quite a bit without her, but at that time I was told that if I engaged Mr. Bonyng without Miss Sutherland, I would have much more of Miss Sutherland and probably at a lower fee. But she didn't hold me up.

The only incident that I recall which really upset me, which I mentioned before, was when she cancelled.

Sutherland is a real star without having the star's allures of any kind. She's the most human colleague one can imagine, and in rehearsals--like all great artists, always on time, always prepared. Rickie is not always as civil with her as he should be. I consider them both great friends.

Rickie has a temper, and moods. In 1975, a young British director [Patrick Libby] staged Trovatore. In Sutherland's first aria she was badly lit and Bonyng stopped and said, "I will not continue until I see the star."

Two Important Debuts: Graziella Sciutti and Reri Grist

Pfaff: There are two other debuts I would like to discuss briefly because I think they're important. They were about the same time--the first one was the American debut of Graziella Sciutti in 1961. She was Susanna and Oscar in that season. What was she like as an artist and as a person?

Adler: She was a wonderful artist. I always had the greatest admiration for her voice, which was not the biggest voice; for her musicianship, which was incredible; for her acting; for her looks; for her ability to wear the costumes right. You know it depends sometimes on how a costume is worn, whether it is successful or not.

Sciutti looked wonderful. A pretty girl, petite. Very smart girl. I respected her intellectually. I was a great fan of Sciutti's, and I used to get together with her. She was married to

a gentleman in the diamond business. They had a wonderful house in Geneva and when she wasn't singing any more I saw her in Geneva. She came here for one of my anniversaries.

Her voice was very light, but it was skillful. Her Mozart was incredible, and the combination of Schwarzkopf and Sciutti in a performance was really a pleasure. I could never get her often enough.

Graziella was an artist who did not have too many roles in her repertoire. She had the Mozart soubrettes, of course, which she sang here and I'm sure she sang Don Pasquale, and maybe some Rossini. But it wasn't a large repertoire. If a singer has only a few operas in her repertoire, she is difficult to accommodate. Graziella Sciutti and Luigi Alva were continuously at La Scala, and when they had long rehearsals, there was no way of getting them here. Furthermore, I think that the Piccola Scala was performing and both Alva and Sciutti sang frequently at Piccola Scala.

Pfaff: And Reri Grist, who first appeared here in '63?

Adler: Oh, Reri! Reri actually had a similar repertoire to Sciutti's, except that she also sang bigger coloratura roles, like--I don't know if she sang it here--but I certainly have heard her in Munich recently as Gilda.

Pfaff: And Zerbinetta.

Adler: She sang Zerbinetta. Sciutti was really the coloratura soubrette, not the lyric soubrette, while Reri could really go on both ends, toward the lyric and toward the coloratura. Reri has done many roles here, always successful. The one role where she wasn't well-liked was Manon. She had her doubts about the role, and I felt one should try it. I don't know; maybe she was right.

Perhaps she wasn't vocally able to do the dramatic spots any more. She was terribly insecure in the role, because she wasn't sure that it was right to do it. She had asked me for it, but she wasn't quite sure that it was right.

Actually, when I say "asked"--we were looking for new roles for her, and we both came up with Manon. Reri wasn't the type who would really ask for something.

Pfaff: What kind of person was she?

Adler: Bright, very bright, and very nice. A good artist. She was very proud of being black. Very proud. She actually undertook at one time a study--I don't know what became of it--to see if black

voices were different. She asked everybody, and was really making a case out of it. Remember her in Dialogues of the Carmelites? Exquisite.

In Munich there was a Rigoletto, a production originally staged by Polanski. He did all kinds of strange things which a person who was versed in opera would not do, and Reri did not rehearse with him. She came in much later, a year or two after he had put this on the Munich stage. My son was directing at that time, and he had to follow the Polanski directions.

He and Reri are on very friendly terms, and his family are always at their house in Munich; they are together a great deal. But she was absolutely beaten by the directions that she had to take. Very unhappy. I heard her as Gilda and compared to that production, the Rigoletto of Ponnelle is nothing--the other one was so crazy.

One had to be careful with Reri because she is black. She thought she wouldn't make it, but she was so popular in Europe, you have no idea. In Vienna they adored her; in Munich they adored her. But she was a great singer, great actress, and a great gal.



Kurt Herbert Adler and "Rosinante," Vienna, 1906.

Courtesy of Nancy Adler



Kurt Herbert Adler and Ida Bauer Adler,
1916.

Courtesy of Nancy Adler



Gaetano Merola, founder and director of San Francisco Opera, 1922-1953, with diva Mary Garden in the 1920s.



Governor Ronald Reagan, soprano Jeannette Pilou, Kurt Herbert Adler, Nancy Reagan and Franco Bonisolli, during a performance of La Traviata, 1969.

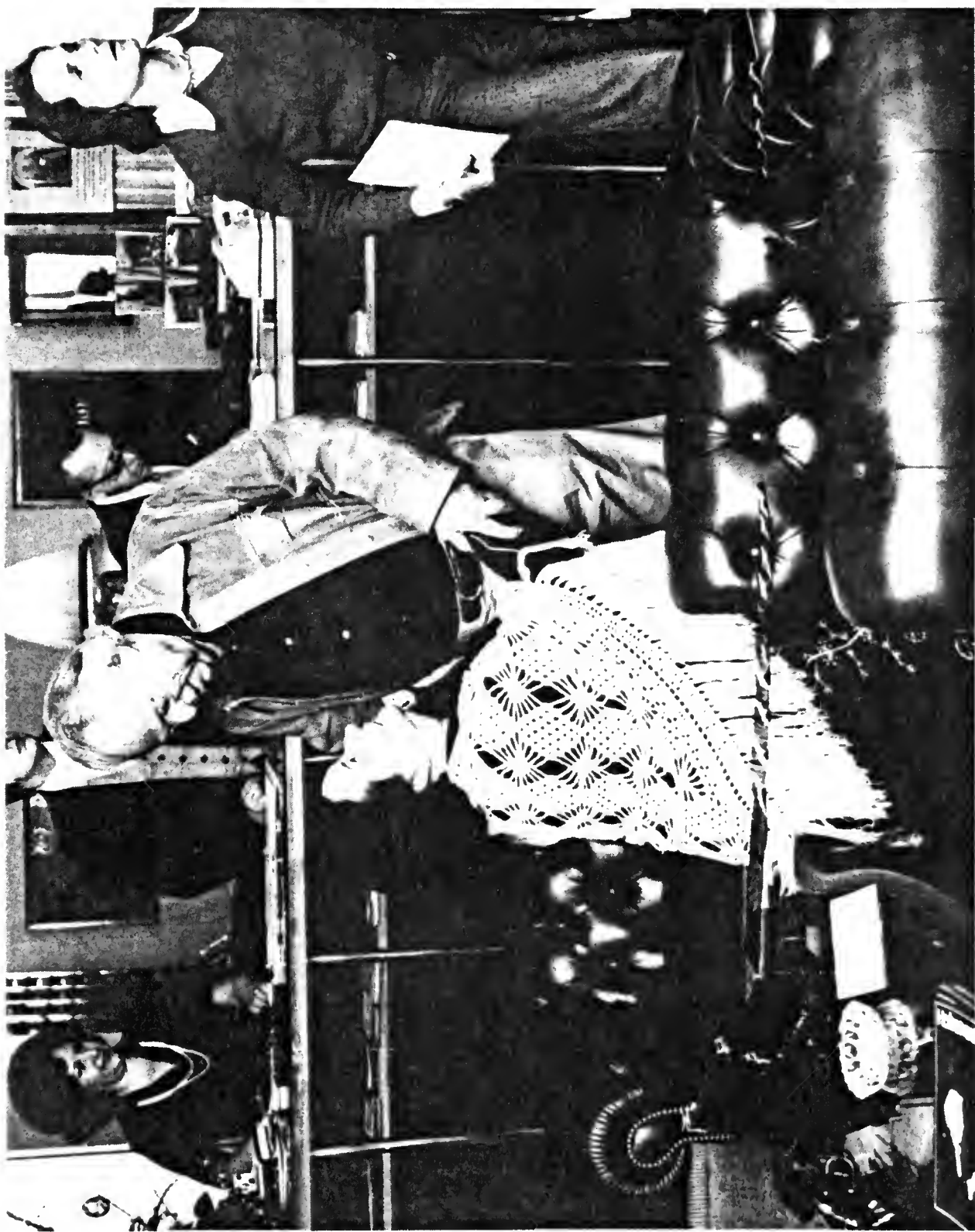
Photograph by Ken Peters



Dame Joan Sutherland in the title role of Massenet's Esclarmonde, 1974.



San Francisco Opera's American premiere production of Massenet's Esclarmonde, with Joan Sutherland in the title role and Richard Bonynghe conducting. Designer, Beni Montresor; director, Lotfi Mansouri. 1974. Photo: Carolyn Mason Jones.



Adler greets soprano Montserrat Caballé at the Bristol Hotel, Salzburg, Austria, during his 1976 European trip. Nancy Adler at right.

Courtesy of Nancy Adler



Kurt Herbert Adler rehearses Lohengrin with assistants Philip Eisenberg and Calvin Simmons, 1978.

Courtesy of Nancy Adler



Kurt Herbert Adler conducts an orchestra rehearsal in the opera house, 1978.

Courtesy of Nancy Adler



Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's 1978 production of Verdi's Otello, with Katia Ricciarelli and Placido Domingo.
Photo: Caroline Crawford.



Kurt Herbert Adler and musical supervisor Otto Guth, backstage at San Francisco Opera, 1979.

Photograph by Ira Newinski



Adler pays a visit to wigs and makeup, 1980.

Photograph by Ira Nowinski



Kurt Herbert Adler conducted Carmen in his retirement season, 1981, with his Don Jose, Placido Domingo.

Courtesy of Nancy Adler



Kurt Herbert Adler with son Roman and daughter Sabrina, 1985.

IX MORE ABOUT THE 1960s

[Interview 9: March 21, 1985] ##

Meeting and Marrying Nancy Miller Adler: 1965

Pfaff: We are at the point in the chronology now where you've met and married your present wife, so I thought I would like to give some of the session if not all of the session to that. Please tell me when and how you met her.

Adler: In 1962 or '63, Mr. Miller asked me if I could advise a young relative of his where to study stage design. Nancy came to see me; we talked about it and I suggested she should go to school in New York for a while.

When she graduated there, which was in 1965, she wrote me and asked, what now? I was terribly busy in those days, and I never got around to answering her. She was still in New York when I came back from one of my trips to Europe, and I called her. I remember I had a terrible cold then; I almost couldn't talk. I said to her that I had a meeting at the hotel where I was staying of several stage directors and designers, among them Oliver Smith. I thought that that would be interesting for her and perhaps we would have a moment to talk.

Well, it was a very drawn-out meeting, and we hardly had time to talk. After she left, Smith said to me, "Who was that girl?" I told him the story, and he said, "Well, I have an excellent impression of her. I think when I come to San Francisco in the fall," (he was designing Fledermaus and Trovatore at that time for us), "I would like to see her around."

So I engaged Nancy and told her we would rotate her through all the departments. It was an absolutely ridiculous salary, but really, we still laugh when we talk about it.

A while later she called me, and said that Santa Fe Opera had offered her a position, I think in the costume department. She was wondering if she shouldn't go there first, and my advice was that she probably would learn more if she would first look at a major operation of the magnitude of San Francisco--which doesn't mean that the standards of Santa Fe are bad, but it is a different kind of thing. I felt that she would be able to contribute more to Santa Fe if she had been in San Francisco or another major company before.

So she said she would think it over. Fifteen minutes later she called me back from New York and said she would be in San Francisco as planned. I think it was May 5, 1965. Well, she came, and one of the first things I asked her to do was to make a tiny cardboard music stand as a joke for Jimmy Schwabacher, who frequently didn't memorize what he had to sing, and, at that time, was to sing David in the third act of Meistersinger with the San Francisco Symphony and Monteux. So we put this little music stand in his dressing room.

That was May, and we got better and better acquainted. At first she didn't even want to have a drink with me, and I remember complaining to Mrs. Miller Cooper that she had a relative--Nancy's father was a cousin of Mr. Robert Watt Miller--who thought it was not right to have a drink with me.

Well, she finally did, and we decided to get married. It happened by a swimming pool of friends here in Marin County, and I remember with amusement we went out to a restaurant afterwards here in San Anselmo or Fairfax, and the first thing the waiter asked when we ordered drinks was to see Nancy's I.D., because she looked so young that he didn't believe she could be served a drink.

We didn't tell anybody. I took three days off in August, and she quit on August 1. I think at that time she was working in the rehearsal department if I am not mistaken. We got married on the twenty-third of August at 4:30, and on the twenty-third in the morning I was in the office until noon. I had a release prepared which I gave in an envelope to Paul Hager (who knew about it, by the way) and asked Hager to give it to the publicity department for immediate release at 5:00. We drove up to Yosemite, Nancy fell asleep, and I was stopped for speeding near Tracy. The policeman said, "You were going much too fast. I have been following you for seven miles and couldn't catch up with you." I said, "Well, you must have a very poor car." [chuckles]

Anyhow, he saw that Nancy had flowers on and she woke up and said, "Officer, we just got married." So the policeman said, "I'll give you, as a wedding present, no ticket." So we decided when we

drove back three days later, because that's all I could take off, to drive very slowly through the area of Tracy in order not to offend our friendly policeman.

It caused kind of a sensation. On the front page of the Chronicle appeared, the twenty-fourth of August, a picture of Nancy and a picture of me. The headline was, "Sixty-year-old Opera Director marries Twenty-three-year old Socialite." Lots of talk and whatnot when we came back. I remember telling Mr. Miller, "You know, I think for opening night we don't have to give an opera. All Nancy and I have to do is sit in our box!" (which was Box A). "You put a spotlight on us and that's the opening. The people who usually go to opening performances will prefer to get out quickly and go after their own enjoyment, after having seen the new couple."

So that is the story. In the years afterward, Nancy, who understood a great deal about opera and theater, frequently attended the rehearsals. She told me her opinions and sometimes I followed her suggestions and sometimes I didn't. She never interfered with singing or direction. Sometimes she said the orchestra was too loud, but although she is musical, she talked much less about the musical side than about the staging and the technical side and the looks of the stage and so on.

A man like Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, for instance, thought very highly of her. So did Hager and [Wolfgang] Skalicki, who designed so much for us. Also Leni Bauer-Ecsy. All those people were very fond of Nancy and still are. That was 1965.

Oliver Smith and the 1965 Die Fledermaus

Adler: Oliver Smith was the leading designer at that time. For me to judge the Fledermaus was not easy, because coming from Vienna, it was a piece I grew up with, of course. I am not so sure that I was entirely satisfied with what Smith and Hager concocted there, but it was stunning. In those days I would not have interfered with Mr. Smith, you know? I would ask questions, but after all it was only twelve years after I took over the company, and I was still fairly young and looked in awe at Oliver Smith.

There's one more thing about after we got married. We found a photograph in a newspaper clipping from 1949. In 1949, 1950, and I think a couple of seasons afterwards, Pierre Monteux selected me to conduct the San Francisco student concerts, and a picture was taken in which I sat at an upright piano with six or seven kids. Among

those kids was Nancy and her brother, seven years old. We are still highly amused at this picture.

Pfaff: What kind of young woman was she? She was obviously a very distinctive young woman to have caught your eye, and a talented one.

Adler: That is very hard to describe. She certainly was a very attractive girl, with lots of spirit and ideas. I thought very highly of her work in spite of the fact that she was incredibly green. She had no idea, and I knew if she had gone to Santa Fe they would have made a student out of her only. But this way, by rotating her and having her watched by the heads of the departments, she developed very fast, because she apprehended things quickly.

Pfaff: I was noticing in the scrapbook that your wife put together that she was not a typical socialite, and not even a typical young woman. It seems like she's very independent.

Adler: When she was in college, for instance, she had her own tiny little film company and filmed some things. All kinds of documentary things. She liked also to photograph. I think that at that time, her visual talents were very important to her. She knew also music; she studied some music at UC Berkeley, and she was at Sarah Lawrence and studied there.

Pfaff: That's in fact where she got her bachelor's degree, is it not?

Adler: I think so, yes. Of course, it didn't bother me at all that she was so much younger. When I was young, I always liked to mix with older people, and when I got older, I liked to mix with younger people. So now I like to be with my little children as well as my other children.

Nancy Adler's Role: Traveling in Europe

Pfaff: How soon did she begin to take an active part in your trips to Europe?

Adler: Oh, immediately after we got married.

Pfaff: What roles did she play on these trips? She talked in an early interview about having to learn the languages quickly.

Adler: Well, sure, because I worked and she was left alone a great deal. She would rarely go with me to my meetings with agents or singers

or conductors. She went with me to performances, or when I asked some people for dinner or I was asked for dinner, naturally she came along. But to meetings, no. So she was alone a great deal.

But she got along quite well--she knew some French, but she had to pick up some German and some Italian, because I regularly went to Germany and Italy. She acted, practically, as my tour secretary. She helped me organize everything; she did the corresponding with San Francisco Opera or whoever it was, while traveling; she kept track of the travel arrangements, the airline schedules, hotels, and so forth. Very frequently I worked until the last moment in the hotel so she had to go down and pay the bill so we could make our plane. To my recollection we never missed a plane. She certainly helped me enormously on those trips.

Pfaff: One of the things that the early clippings about her at the time of your marriage suggest is that she was a very independent young woman. There was even some talk about her going through Pacific Heights on a motorcycle!

Adler: She owned a motorcycle, yes. When she was still in Berkeley, she had a motor scooter. That I remember. She had her car and was a very, very fast driver and still is, for my taste, too fast. I have given up this racing business.

Pfaff: Do you think it's fair to characterize her as an independent woman? She sounds like someone who has her own mind.

Adler: Very much so, yes. She has her own opinion, and she'll stick to it. I think she had this also at home. She has one brother. Her mother is alive. Her father died a few years ago. He thought it wasn't a good idea that we were getting married. He was one year younger than I. But then he liked me very much; so does her mother.

Nancy has a good memory, and this is helpful in many ways. I must say, in modesty, that I have a remarkable memory, and I had to work very fast, always. I worked with a very small staff and was involved in all facets of the operation, and her memory was quite helpful in my work. But she always sat apart [at rehearsals], you know. She wouldn't interfere.

Pfaff: From the accounts I was able to find in newspapers, it sounds like, at least until Sabrina and Roman were born, that she and you spent your work days pretty much together.

Adler: I wouldn't say so, frankly. Work days she did not sit in my office and work with me in my office. Never. She came and she brought me food, maybe, when I was tired of what my secretaries would produce.

More often than not I didn't have time for dinner, and frequently didn't go out for lunch at all, so she often brought me something to eat, but she did not participate in the work in the office. She saw to it that my personal correspondence was taken care of, too, but she never had anything to do with administration.

She helped mainly when we traveled and then in the vein I described a moment ago, and naturally someone who has opinions can be a very good assistant without necessarily following her opinions. I always followed my own opinions.

The 1964 Katerina Ismailova

Pfaff: I want to talk about the 1964 season, about the Katerina Ismailova and about Wolfram Skalicki and the Fidelio and Parsifal he did for you. Why did you choose the Shostakovich work in that version?

Adler: I had heard a performance in Düsseldorf conducted by Alberto Erede, and I was very much impressed by the work. The material, the orchestral material and scores, were not available at that time; Erede told me that he had somehow--put this in quotes--"stolen" the material. I don't know how he got it.

Then it became possible to get the material for Katerina Ismailova, and that's why I did it. I did it in English because I was convinced at that time that a drama as strong as Katerina Ismailova should be performed in English, so one could understand at least some words.

This performance was a big success, but as you probably remember, we did it another time in Russian, with Anja Silja. That was Lady Macbeth, the original version, not the watered-down Katerina version. The Katerina version is, both in the libretto and musically, more modified--some very harsh or hard things were changed in the orchestration.

Pfaff: I didn't know it was musically modified.

Adler: Oh, yes, there were other changes. Not too many, really. But later on, when I realized that the public was willing to accept original languages, we did Lady Macbeth in Russian, and that was an enormous success, even more so.

Designers Wolfram and Amrei Skalicki

Adler: The designer Wolfram Skalicki lived near Graz in Austria, and he and his wife, Amrei, came. They were a pair. She designed most of the costumes for his productions here. I wasn't quite sure that this was really the thing to do, to have a couple. But somehow, at times, people belong together, so they both worked for the San Francisco Opera a great deal. As I said about Paul Hager at one time, it was the right moment for the opera and for them.

Pfaff: Was it very different from the relationship of Ponnelle and his wife? I know that Ponnelle's wife was an actress, too, but wasn't she involved in some of the designs?

Adler: I remember only that when he came to do the sets for Carmina Burana she helped with the costumes. Nothing else, to my recollection. Amrei was a costume designer professionally, and Skalicki always wanted her to be engaged as costume designer. I don't know if they have continued this practice, but for years he wanted her to design costumes. Terribly nice people; good friends.

He was a designer who would swallow our technical and financial limitations in those days, and make the best of what he had. I remember discussing the operas that Hager and Skalicki, or the Skalickis, were doing for San Francisco; always it was a pleasure and a satisfaction. I think the Skalickis are still working in Toronto, where Lotfi Mansouri is general director. He met them here, and he may have known them from Europe. Skalicki was in Austria and Mansouri was in Geneva.

About Rehearsal Spaces ##

Adler: Talking about those activities and thinking back, I realize how important it was to me what was happening at that stage, and how we could manage, because it wasn't easy. Not enough money; no place to rehearse. In the beginning we didn't have an adequate shop. The warehouse on Indiana Street which the company still uses for construction and storage, we got much later. We also got space in the Armory--I am not sure that they are still using the Armory now--but it was a really horrible place to work, both for the stagehands and painters, because of the ice cold, and the terrible acoustics. We tried to modify the acoustics because it was possible to set up several sets at the same time and not have to change them for each staging rehearsal.

Pfaff: Yes. You could set up the whole production.

Adler: Like in a television studio, where you would set up each scene of an act in a different area, so you don't have to change scenery. That we did in the Armory.

John Priest tried also to help with the acoustics, but it was an awful place, not to mention the terrible neighborhood. There were people who really were worried about coming and going. Finally we had to give it up, but I think the Armory was a good reason for me to fight for and get the rehearsal building on Franklin Street. That changed the operations of the opera considerably. I don't remember the year [1981] but there is a stage which is a duplication of the main stage at the opera house and some smaller rehearsal rooms.

Pfaff: Are you referring now to the Zellerbach Hall that's behind Davies Hall or the opera annex?

Adler: No, no, no. The opera annex has only a storage area on the ground floor for scenery behind the stage, so that one can move scenery out in the back. But that had no influence on the rehearsals, really.

Skalicki and Projections

Pfaff: Wasn't this Parsifal of Skalicki's famous for its early use of projections?

Adler: Yes. He used to work with projections, but we had another man first, a Viennese who came through Harry Horner, and that's when we started using projections. Skalicki developed it more and more, and over the course of the years we got better projectors and knew better how to handle them. You know, it is really not true that projections can replace scenery. What projections are in a production is something that is more on the lighting side. Certainly no realism can be really replaced by projections. There was always the problem of where to project from and how to make sure that the screens didn't move during the performance. But we were in on projections when they were new to the American stage, and Skalicki, as you asked, knew about them.

There was a firm in Vienna which was quite advanced in the use of projections, and we bought some equipment there. However, I think it is easier to paint a slide than it is to paint scenery, and there were years where we had the feeling--not just in San

Francisco, but in Vienna--that there were not too many outstanding scenic artists and painters.

When I came to San Francisco, Mr. Merola used a Russian man, Eugene Dunkel, and he was an outstanding painter, except, for my taste, his colors were always very dark.

We had another excellent scenic artist named Dave West here for many years, and he really was an excellent painter. A guy like Ponnelle, who himself is a great painter, thought the world of Dave West.

So I was fortunate in this respect. At that time the technical director was Tom Colangelo, and he then left for the symphony, which was certainly easier work. I am not so sure it was as interesting as the tasks I gave him, but so it was. I think gratefully back through the years when he, like Skalicki, delivered the goods without really having what it takes to deliver good goods. [Armando] Agnini, from the Merola years, knew a lot about the stage, but it was very old-fashioned. Perhaps not enough attention was given by Maestro Merola to scenery, painting scenery, construction, storage.

Space Problems for the Opera and Proposition B: 1965

Adler: You know, they used to store scenery here in a way that really ruined it. There was a small, small warehouse on Fillmore Street; I shudder when I think of it. And there they tried to squeeze in what they could. It didn't make sense. That was before Indiana Street, where we have a fairly big warehouse. I think it was John Priest who had installations done where it was practical to store, where you found things, and they were not ruined by storage. Then we needed space to build, and that took a lot of storage area away again.

When you paint backdrops, for instance--the backdrops for the Opera House must be very, very big--there are two ways of painting, vertical painting or horizontal painting. In horizontal painting you have to put the drop down on the floor. In the beginning it was done at the warehouse; later on in the Armory. Painting in the opera house could only be done in a vertical frame, because there were rehearsals all the time, and the only rehearsal place at that time was the stage of the opera house. The facilities, so to say, were really sad. I think that my being stubborn about the necessity of changing this helped to get what's there now.

Pfaff: One of the things that Bloomfield mentions is that during the '65 season there was a Proposition B on the city ballot about money for the improvement of the opera house--and that it didn't go, but that it was important.

Adler: The chairman of Pacific Lighting was more or less promoting Proposition B, if I am not mistaken. Unfortunately, it did not convince the people that the opera and the symphony really needed Proposition B, so it was defeated, and that delayed the improvements unduly. I am sorry I lost some years. But finally some people were convinced that we needed improvements.

Pfaff: Because of the proposition?

Adler: Yes. It remained so difficult to work in the opera house, which was built as a road house, and to bring in finished shows. I really don't quite understand how this could happen. After all, in 1932, when the opera house was opened, there was a season, but it was a short season, and I think in the thirties there were fewer works.

Mr. Merola increased the number of operas he performed in those short seasons unduly, I must tell you, but it should have been known when the building was constructed that one would need rehearsal space and offices. The offices were in dressing rooms on the south side of the building and the only real rehearsal room was the old chorus room, where now the Archives for the Performing Arts are. The chorus room had a shape which was not very helpful to the acoustics, and so one had to learn how to hear what this chorus sang, you know? We were stretched out in width, and had no depth. I tried to change the seating; we took platforms in, we took platforms out. But it was just the wrong room, and that was the only rehearsal room--no studios and no ensemble rooms. The rehearsals had to take place in dressing rooms, and dressing rooms unavoidably have dust and smells of all kinds, and it was really hard to rehearse. Artists were not very happy, but then in those very early days of Maestro Merola, there probably were very few rehearsals.

Later on I moved my offices to the other side of the building. We gave up part of what was called the carpenter shop, which was useless anyhow when we got the warehouse and established a shop out there on Indiana Street. That became a little better. I had a decent office; it wasn't a very big one, but there were wonderful windows. We had a conference room, which had not existed, and the secretaries had an area.

Mr. Merola had worked with one or two secretaries, because the operation was so much smaller then, and they were in a small

dressing room. At that time I had an office which was the closet at the end of the hall, and they had to look all over to find a desk which would fit in, because besides a desk and me, nothing could be in there. Later on poor Matthew Farruggio was squeezed into this. I was still on the south side of the building then.

Of course, as an organization develops, nothing is ever enough. Things are satisfactory for a short time, and then you are amazed how you could have lived and operated without the new rooms or accommodations or whatever it is.

On Musicians' Attire and Customs

Adler: Still, I never could understand that the original plans of the opera house did not include an orchestra room, for instance, where they could relax during intermissions or sit down. They had a room where the men changed into their tails, but I don't know what the girls did. It made San Francisco very elegant that the orchestra played in tails.

Pfaff: That was unusual at the time?

Adler: It was quite unusual at the time and also now. There are not many theaters where the orchestra plays in tails. At the opera in Vienna, for instance, the orchestra plays in black jackets except for opening night, as far as I know. When I was in Russia, however, visiting and studying what they were doing, I was amazed to see that in the communist country, the orchestras play in tails.

Another thing that in San Francisco is the tradition and I think not in many theaters, is that the orchestra in the pit remains seated during curtain calls after each act and at the end of the performance. Originally they had to stay until the applause was over, but then I considered that it was really enough if the orchestra stayed in the pit until the conductor came on the stage and took his bow after a performance.

That was one of the battles the unions were fighting. They didn't like tails, and wanted to play in tuxedos, as the Met orchestra does. Actually, Jimmy Levine conducts in a tuxedo, I think, except for opening night. The Chicago Opera Orchestra plays in tuxedos, too, so it's funny that in some smaller theaters, the orchestra plays in tails. I think it's pride.

In Vienna, where they don't wear tails, when the new house was built and completed after the war, the pit was hydraulic, and the

orchestra, which is mostly made up of Vienna Philharmonic players, didn't like being so low. They wanted to come higher up so they could be seen. It's a true story.

I am not sure if it is that way in all opera houses, but in many opera houses the orchestra, which has a tendency to be too loud for smaller voices especially, sounds better and softer if the pit is not too far down. In other houses, it is believed that if you can change the position of the players, the danger of covering the voices is small if they are farther down. Now I am not so sure that this is true. Acoustics is a science that has not been mastered. Otherwise we wouldn't have so many poor auditoriums.

Enlarging the Orchestra Pit

Adler: The San Francisco Opera pit is partly hydraulic, but the ends are not, which makes it very difficult to arrange seating, especially since the capacity of the pit is small. The pit can be enlarged in San Francisco by taking out two rows of seats.

Stingy as I was, and I needed to get as much cash in as I could, I insisted on playing operas where you didn't really need the enlarged pit. In my calculations I have found that, although it cost money to change from the small pit to the large pit and from the large pit back to the small pit, that the financial situation was still better when you made those changes, rather than leaving it larger all the time. I understand that now they leave the large pit all the time.

While I was running the company, we often discussed adding more seats to the opera house. Boxes were very much in demand all the time and we thought of installing a second tier of boxes. Other changes were also discussed. The old Metropolitan had some little social halls, where those who supported the opera could gather, for instance, and we don't have anything like this. So we often discussed it to see if we could make some adjustments to get some places [like those].

In San Francisco the bars are very important, you know, and now they have a second bar on the south side of the opera house where the museum is. That came in my last years and it helped the situation, but the crowds in the original box bar are still frightening, and I must say I would rather forego a drink than fight for my drink!

All those things are very interesting in that they were not foreseen. I fully understand the necessity of economy, but sometimes economy won over my warnings that in the future, the things being done would be inadequate. The people who eventually ran the opera would say, "We must do this; we must do that," but the time wouldn't be there; the money wouldn't be there, and so on. But there are limitations, and you have to bow to this.

Pfaff: What made it possible for you to extend the pit in '76 for the Walküre and Die Frau? Why did you finally do it?

Adler: Well, I did it for just those two operas if I remember right. Look--the Ring was played in a condensed version, which naturally is not the real Wagner. It's not that the condensation is so bad, but the Ring without tubas and without a decent string section, and without four woodwinds, and so forth, is not the real Ring. That is what I inherited and then fortunately I was in a position to say, "Well, those are bygone days. Our standings are higher now and we have to acknowledge it by having a larger pit and a larger orchestra."

Pfaff: Did you have to raise special money to do that?

Adler: No, I didn't. In the sixties I was not yet so involved in fund-raising. They found out later only, fortunately, that I was pretty good at fund-raising, but the money had to be provided at that time, and Mr. Miller, as you know, was a man who knew how to give it and to get it.

More About Projections

Pfaff: I was meaning to ask you while we were talking about Skalicki, and particularly the Parsifal, how did the public accept the change from painted scenery to projections?

Adler: If the visual impact was good--if it looked good and if good colors were used--they bought it. It was in the fifties that we started using projections. Harry Horner used them. I still feel that projections are more a part of the lighting, the art of lighting, than the art of scenery, but that's not what it was to start with. Some tried at times to replace scenery with projections, and I don't think it is really quite right.

Pfaff: I thought that they worked very, very well in the Katya Kabanova that you did--with Günther Schneider-Siemssen.

Adler: Yes. Schneider-Siemssen is, in my estimation, the top man in projections. He has fabulous experience. I mean, he has done so much, that what you get from him really works and it is good. I have the highest esteem for Günther, and I think he did this production very well. It looked good, it was practical. That's another thing: I think that Katya Kabanova is very well suited to this approach. You see, not every opera is suited for projections.

Wieland Wagner ##

Adler: Nowadays, the Ring uses a combination of scenery and projections, but in the Wieland days and the days after Wieland, projections were the answer. Fortunately, artistic approaches, artistic standards, artistic execution, change with the times, and those who are stubborn and don't want to change do not contribute the best to the art form. The flexibility of any art form is important. Who would think that paintings and the art of painting didn't change? It changes all the time. Okay, people like it or don't like it, but nobody will say it has to remain the same.

Pfaff: Did you see all of the great Wieland Wagner productions at Bayreuth?

Adler: No. As a matter of fact, I never was in Bayreuth, to my great sorrow, when Wieland was alive. I saw Wieland productions in Stuttgart, where he worked a great deal. He and Professor Schaffer, who was Intendant of the Stuttgart Opera, were very close friends. Wieland liked to work in Stuttgart. I also saw Wieland's work in Hamburg. The problem [was] that we continued in the Wieland style for years without Wieland, and it didn't work because Wieland's style without Wieland just wasn't the same. We understood what he wanted, but we couldn't achieve it.

Pfaff: That is a very difficult question, but what is your estimation of the impact that Wieland's productions had on opera production and theater production in general?

Adler: Oh, enormous. Enormous. Not only in Germany, but also in France, England, and Italy--and the States. This unique talent of Wieland's influenced the style of production. Unfortunately, it was at times used as a means of economy, which was really not what Wieland intended. I think I told the story of the Ring, and how I had asked Wieland to do the Ring for San Francisco.

I had written to Wieland and I had invited him to do a new Ring for San Francisco. It was in the late fifties, I believe,

late fifties or early sixties. He sent me a proposal which I gave to our technical people so they could make an estimate. Well, the estimate was over a million dollars for the Ring, which at that time was just incredible and completely out of reach for me. So I wrote Wieland a regretful letter and said that America was too poor to execute his plans, which were the plans of a genius.

A few years later, I came to Hamburg especially to see a new Tristan by Wieland. I met him personally. After the performance he said to me, "You know, Mr. Adler, since we corresponded I have learned so much that I think I could give you a good Ring which even America could afford."

Well, we didn't make arrangements for a Ring at that time, but we arranged for Lohengrin and Salome. Unfortunately, he died before we came to it, and the Lohengrin never materialized. But Anja Silja, whom I had engaged, sang Salome here in the last version Wieland had designed in 1968. (He changed the version repeatedly.) The San Francisco version, which I had to buy from his widow in Switzerland, was different, for instance, from the Salome he had done for West Berlin, and from the Stuttgart Salome.

For a while it worked quite well. Our technical people really did something excellent for the cover of the well, which was not quite successful in other theaters. Again, there was a lady from Munich who had been an assistant of Wieland's who knew, she said, what he wanted to do with that Salome [Renata Ebermann]. She directed it here, and it was Wieland without Wieland.

Pfaff: Was it a pre-existing production that you bought the physical parts of, or you bought designs from him? You said you got it from his widow.

Adler: The designs. I had made an arrangement with him, but she didn't recognize that arrangement, so I had to pay her for the designs which she, by that time, felt she owned.

Pfaff: And the designs were for a production for San Francisco and hadn't been done elsewhere?

Adler: I believe that Geneva did it before San Francisco.

Pfaff: Is that the same Salome we had until [Nikolaus] Lehnhoff's latest?

Adler: Yes.

Pfaff: I think it was a budget Salome, too.

Adler: I am sorry that I did it myself. Sometimes it would be better to use an old production than to build a new one which is built too cheaply.

My main crime, and I have to confess it, was that when Leni Bauer-Ecsy sent us a beautiful Marriage of Figaro, we didn't have the money to do it. We cut and cut and cut on the designs. What finally came out was really not good, and I think that later on I understood better from discussions and drawings what the outcome would be. But my advisors at the time felt we needed a Figaro, and thought this would be better than the old one. But we did Leni no justice. Leni Bauer-Ecsy was a very elegant designer--she designed many productions for Günther Rennert, who, in his day, was really the leading stage director.

The Skalicki/Hager/Mansouri "Team"

Pfaff: One of the things that Bloomfield writes about is the presence of people like Skalicki and Lotfi Mansouri, over a period of years, giving a sense of artistic continuity and a certain look to San Francisco Opera productions.

Adler: That is possible. I'm not sure that it is the best to have only continuity. If we had continuity, I am glad, but I hope we had also productions which deviated from the Skalicki/Hager/Mansouri trend.

Pfaff: How much were you striving for a particular look, or what were you looking for in a new production?

Adler: I think we should discuss here something that happened--we had for a while Leo Kurz here. Now Leo Kurz was one of the very best, as far as lighting goes. I don't know for sure that his scenery design was the best and was lasting in its style, but Kurz had the idea that we should really have one designer for the entire season. He did not sell it to me, I am glad to say. He sold it to City Opera and to Leinsdorf, who was running City Opera at that time, and it was a disaster, because when you have ten or twelve operas in the repertoire, the public doesn't want to see the same approach. Uniformity bothered me. Skalicki was very practical because he wasn't too expensive.

Pfaff: Kurz was also a designer for you?

Adler: Yes, and he did some things, especially where the lighting was all-important, which were excellent. But then there were other

things. I think we talked about Francesca da Rimini. His use of the Ponnelle bridge from Frau ohne Schatten and whatever else he did didn't really do justice to Francesca. We had no money, and at that time I had the feeling, let's do as many new things as we can, and let's do it the way we can. I think I probably modified my approach in later years.

The 1965 Season: Lulu and Pelléas and Mélisande

Pfaff: In the '65 season you did two modern works that were absolutely at the core of the repertory: Pelléas and Lulu. How did you approach Lulu, and how did it go over with the public?

Adler: That was the two-act version of Lulu. It did not have the same success as Wozzeck. I think it was an interesting production, and Leopold Ludwig, the conductor, conducted Berg extremely well. In my recollection, he did Wozzeck and that was closer to him than Lulu, but I remember the interludes of Lulu, which had enormous impact. We did a kind of dramatized version of the sketches that were used for the ending at that time.

I have heard the later version, but I am not quite sure if I didn't like the former version better. There are some scenes which are too long, and naturally everybody hates to make cuts, but I think that this interlude, the intermezzo at the end, was so emotional, at least the way Ludwig did it, and I missed it the next time. I didn't do the three-act version here.

Pfaff: It's not been done here yet. When did you hear the three-act version?

Adler: In various places. Santa Fe. In Europe. A new production of Lulu is coming up in June in Munich, by Ponnelle--which surprises me.

Pfaff: Why is that?

Adler: I don't think that ten years ago he would have wanted to do it.

Pfaff: Do you feel that the public just wasn't ready for Lulu at the time? It's so much less sympathetic than Wozzeck.

Adler: I think that is one reason.. Also, I am not sure that I had the ideal cast.

Pfaff: Didn't you have Evelyn Lear the first time?

Adler: Yes. It was difficult for her vocally. I had Hans Hotter as Schigolch, which was an amazing piece of casting, and I think Hotter, in his way, was fabulous. I believe more and more that in contemporary works, when the public doesn't know them, only the best is good enough. I objected to what Timothy Nolen stated the other day, that contemporary works are badly cast in the United States and that contemporary opera has no support from the press. I think Nolen is not quite sure what he is talking about. I don't remember his having seen any contemporary opera here, but I certainly don't subscribe to his idea.

Pfaff: You did the Pelléas that year with Jean Martinon.

Adler: Martinon was an excellent conductor. I knew him from Europe, and I was glad he came here.

Pfaff: Was he the reason you did the Pelléas that year? That he was available?

Adler: I think Pelléas was overdue on the repertory. It had been here before, to my knowledge. I think Leinsdorf had conducted Pelléas here, years before [1938]. Not for me. But it's hard to say now whether it was Martinon for Pelléas or Pelléas for Martinon. Pilou and Jobin--that was not a bad cast. Who was the rest of the cast?

Pfaff: Thomas Stewart was the Golaud, as I remember.

Adler: It must have been good. Genevieve was probably Turner.

Pfaff: The Mélisande was Pilar Lorengar.

Adler: Lorengar? Not Pilou?

Pfaff: No.

Adler: But Pilou sang it, too.

Pfaff: Yes, I know she did, because I remember reading that. But not then.¹

Adler: I heard a horrible Pelléas in Paris, at the Opera Comique. They had, for some reason, raised the pit, and the entire lighting was out of whack. On top of that, the orchestra played very loudly and not very well. That was not Martinon, but I was horrified, really. Actually the style of playing surprised me. It didn't have what I thought the Debussy interpretation needed.

¹Jeannette Pilou sang Mélisande with Henri Gui as Pelléas in 1969.

Périsson conducted Pelléas, too, here, didn't he?

Pfaff: Yes. Périsson was in '69. And that was Pilou.

Two 1964 Debuts: Pilar Lorengar and Marie Collier

Pfaff: Lorengar had made her debut in 1964. I wanted to ask you about your early interactions with Lorengar. How did you hear her?

Adler: I had heard about Lorengar, and I must have heard her in Europe. I rarely engaged people whom I had not heard. She was an extremely beautiful soprano, both in looks and singing, and her singing was wonderful at that time. I don't know where I heard her first. I saw a photograph before I heard her which fascinated me. She had dark hair at that time, which I think was better. But who was Pelléas with her?

Pfaff: Gui.

Adler: Gui! Yes, yes. He was also a very light type. I had heard him in Paris. [It was Andre Jobin (1965).]

Pfaff: To your way of thinking what were Lorengar's strengths as an artist?

Adler: She had great appeal vocally and visually. She had an excellent means of expression. There are artists who have appeal, but it was her voice as well as her looks.

Pfaff: Was the vibrato very much under control early on?

Adler: She didn't have that vibrato in the early days. She may have sung, as so many sopranos, quite a bit of more dramatic roles. I mean, she went as far as Tosca, and it probably wasn't the best idea. But she was a lovely artist.

Pfaff: Another soprano who entered the roster in 1964 is Marie Collier, who sang Katerina Ismailova.

Adler: Marie Collier. She was definitely an interesting soprano. She was a wild one. She did not have her great talent under control, and she did things in performance which made it almost impossible for her to finish the performance as well as she started it. I remember her Chrysothemis, for instance, which did not come out the way I hope, because of her impetuosity, her lack of pacing. But I

think the San Francisco Opera and I owe to her a large number of very, very important, excellent, and successful performances. I read in the Bloomfield book that he disapproved of her Erwartung. I don't think that this is really quite so. Erwartung is a one-woman show; it's very difficult, and I am not quite sure that Hager's production was the most helpful for a one-woman show.

Didn't Collier sing Tosca here in 1965? That was not her forte, as far as I am concerned. Her vocal approach was not necessarily what you want for a Puccini role. But her Berg was strong. Certainly Katerina Ismailova was very strong. The Janacek Makropulos Case was outstanding.

Pfaff: Did you feel you were going out on a limb with the Makropulos Case? I was just amazed that you had one that early [1966].

Adler: Somehow I got fascinated by the work. I am not sure that we gave it the best conductor. It was Jascha Horenstein, who was a very good conductor, but he didn't have much success here. If I recall right, he did Figaro and Makropulos, and both didn't go so well. I think a more Romantic work would have been right for him, better for him. Also, sometimes people go in one city and don't go in another. There were other cities in Europe where Horenstein was fascinating everybody.

Pfaff: I agree with you. I think he is a very great conductor and I was surprised to read that it hadn't worked here.

Adler: I am not sure that he had conducted Makropulos before. It's one of the most difficult scores to put over.

On Engaging Conductors

Adler: I come to think that the accusation that I didn't have good conductors here is not quite right. After all, in his way, Ludwig was a very good conductor. Leinsdorf was here. [Otmar] Suitner had more success here than anywhere else. Böhm was here. [Fausto] Cleve, Molinari-Pradelli, [Giuseppe] Patané. There were lots of conductors who in other cities were considered the top conductors, but I was continuously accused of not bringing top conductors. Now, whom didn't I bring?

I had engaged Carlos Kleiber and he broke his contract, as he did in so many other places. Probably if Kleiber would have come here, he would not have had the success he had in other cities either.

Pfaff: Then, of course, everybody wanted Karajan to come. We saw how that worked at the Met.

Adler: Karajan in America didn't quite work. I must say that sometimes I wonder if I didn't make a mistake not to gamble on Karajan. He and I were very close and maybe we could have made it together. But I am not sure. I was scared.

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Pfaff: You engaged Szell for Figaro.

Adler: For Figaro. And all of a sudden he had the letter--I don't remember if it was a call or a letter. Anyhow, the outcome was that Szell said, "You and I are such wonderful friends, I am sure if I come to conduct at San Francisco, it will be the end of a friendship which I treasure." And he didn't come. I had to let him go. What could I do?

Was this the year Horenstein conducted Figaro perhaps? It might have been. [It was 1961.] But certainly Szell and I were on very friendly terms, whenever we saw each other. But when I tried to get him here, he didn't take it.

Who else was not here?

Georg Solti: A Planned Ring

Pfaff: Well, I guess Solti came under Merola?

Adler: Well, no. Merola was dead when he came. [1953]

Pfaff: Yes, sorry, but he hired him.

Adler: He had engaged him with my recommendation. Merola didn't know him, but I had recommended him. It was a very interesting thing. He came and made a sensational American debut in Elektra. And then came Tristan, which was also a success. But in Walküre, no. It was the same year, 1953. Solti was to come back here with the Chicago Symphony and play the Ring with the Chicago Symphony in the pit, while the San Francisco Symphony was to fill the last weeks of the Chicago Symphony season--which I think was a great honor. But both the symphony people here and the symphony people in Chicago didn't like it. Both mayors were involved in the fight.

Solti and I had made the arrangements in Europe. He came back from Europe earlier than I and made the announcement in a meeting for businessmen in Chicago. The Chicago Symphony backers objected to Solti doing so much opera, and when they heard that the Chicago Symphony was playing the pit in San Francisco, well, that couldn't be. There was a big to-do about it before I came back, and I tried to salvage it. We had lots of support from Alioto, who was mayor then, and also from Mayor Dale in Chicago, but the business people won, and the symphony people.

Pfaff: Was this for the sixties Ring or for the '72 Ring? You did it the first time in the sixties and then brought it back for the Fiftieth Anniversary season.

Adler: I would think it was the '72 Ring. You see, the whole plan was that Solti would do the Ring in concert form in Chicago and New York, and then we would do it here with scenery--which was not a bad plan.

It would have worked with the Chicago Symphony and Solti. I know that. I don't know if there were very good singers available at that time, and you can only do the Ring if you have the cast.

The 1966 Season: Les Troyens and Elektra

Pfaff: In '66 you did a production that was almost comparable with the Ring in terms of difficulty and complexity, when you did Troyens with Skalickei.

Adler: Who conducted it?

Pfaff: Périssou. Crespin made her debut with that Les Troyens in 1966.

Adler: That was with Vickers. The next time it was Chauvet.

Pfaff: Right. What do you remember of that Troyens?

Adler: Périssou had problems with that opera. I like Périssou very much, but I don't think that this was quite his meat. He had problems with the orchestra, I remember. I think that the production was interesting. I have heard uncut productions, but this production was cut. Naturally, when you do it with no cuts, they say it takes too long; when you do it cut, you are criticized, and that was the case here, too. But it was a big success. I think that Crespin was very, very good.

So was Vickers. You know, when I made the recording with [Renata] Scotto and [Placido] Domingo, at first, we wanted to record the duet.

Pfaff: The "Nuit d'ivresse"?

Adler: Yes. But we didn't come to it, because Domingo was singing and conducting at the same time. We recorded in Vienna, and it was impossible to do this, with him going back and forth, and not having sung the whole opera. But it is wonderful music.

I have frequently used the "Royal Hunt and Storm" music in concert. My greatest satisfaction was when I did the concert, a Royal Gala in London with the Royal Philharmonic, and I used this. The Royal Philharmonic had been the orchestra of Sir Thomas Beecham, and the press wrote that Beecham would have smiled at his orchestra and Kurt Adler if he had heard the Troyens excerpt last night. That was one of the write-ups that I really liked. And of course, the orchestra really played it beautifully.

Pfaff: Was that an opera of Beecham's Les Troyens? It was.

Adler: Yes. Berlioz was very much Beecham's. Beecham conducted here, too, but before me. It was still Merola.

Pfaff: That same season, you brought out the Elektra that's still on the stage now--how do you pronounce the name of that designer?

Adler: [Alfred] Siercke. I'll tell you why we took this concept, because he used it in another theater where I had heard it, and the shape of the set made it possible to hear the voices much better than in any other Elektra set.

We had a terrible time getting the set over. It was built in Europe, if I am not mistaken, and there were problems. We had to adjust it to the shape of the airplane in order to get the parts in. It was one of those frightfully difficult experiments, bringing it from Europe. There was a strike on that airline on which it was supposed to come, and the planes of the other airline which would take it were not exactly the same.

But Siercke was one of the designers whom Rennert used, for instance, and he designed this Barber that was so well liked here. He has done it in two-story and in three-story form. I have seen both.

Who sang Elektra in that production?

Pfaff: I think it was Shuard.

Adler: Amy Shuard? Amy Shuard was an artist whom I liked very much and I used for quite a few years. She sang Wagner here, and she sang Elektra here. She was one of the British artists whom I brought in.

Christel Goltz sang Elektra here, too. She was very good in Elektra, but to my recollection she sang also Elisabetta in Don Carlo, and that did not work the way I hoped it would.

Pfaff: Just because it was an Italian part that she didn't have a feeling for?

Adler: It wasn't the voice for it; it wasn't the feeling for it. She didn't quite know how to phrase it, and so on. She acted it very well, in her way. Goltz's Elektra was monumental.

Pfaff: It seems that you were blessed in Elektras over the years. You just had one great Elektra after another.

Adler: Who else sang Elektra here?

Pfaff: Well, I think your last was [Danica] Mastilović, where there were some problems.

Adler: She used to be a good Elektra. Who else? Nilsson.

I talked to [Leonie] Rysanek about Elektra in her late years. She didn't want to do it. She did the film, as you know, with Böhm. But she didn't want to do it on the stage. I don't know if she ever did it on the stage.

Pfaff: No, she said she never would. I met her right at the time she was promoting the film that had just come out. She said, "I would be dead at the end of the monologue."

Adler: She is singing, now, and I think she will sing it here too, Kostelnicka in Jenufa. I hear it is sensational.

Pfaff: She's singing it already? In Europe?

Adler: She has sung it, yes, in Vienna. She is very unhappy because she has to do it in three languages. That is the problem with international stars, when they sing all over the world, and sing in theaters where it is not done in the original language. Performing in the original language is not only artistically desirable, but it is also practical.

Pfaff: I'm very interested that you were pursuing Rysanek for Elektra. I thought Böhm was the first to suggest it.

Adler: I don't know. Böhm and I often talked, but I remember talking to her about it. I had talked to her about Ortrud. She didn't sing it with me, but she sang it here, maybe a little late. The idea of Ortrud and Venus and Kundry I discussed with her.

Astrid Varnay: The Greatest Ortrud

Adler: You know who sang those roles earlier was Varnay, Astrid Varnay. I don't think that Varnay was really an Elsa, although she sang it here, but she was, in my recollection, the greatest Ortrud that I ever heard, in spite of the fact that I had heard Anna Bahr Mildenburg as Ortrud, too. In Mahler's day in Vienna she was the Ortrud.

You know, it wasn't only the voice, but her enunciation, her diction was something unique for me. I have made marks in my scores. I remember when I worked on Ortrud with Janis Martin, I tried to remember what Astrid had done, because it was so great in my memory.

Pfaff: She seems like just the ideal voice and personality for that very difficult role.

Adler: Absolutely.

Pfaff: Had you heard her sing any of the famous Brünnhildes and Isolde at Bayreuth?

Adler: No. I hadn't been in Bayreuth until a year ago or two years ago.

Pfaff: You mean that was your first visit? How did that ever come to pass?

Adler: It was because during the time of the festival, I couldn't get away. When I was working in Salzburg I couldn't work in Bayreuth, and when I was working in the States, I couldn't go to Bayreuth, because rehearsals were continuous. When I was here or in Chicago in the summer there were chorus rehearsals, and I had to take care of the chorus. Later on, summer was the main rehearsal period. I wanted to be present at those.

X HIGHLIGHTS OF 1966, 1967, 1968

[Interview 10: March 27, 1985] ##

Designer Toni Businger

Pfaff: How did you meet Toni Businger?

Adler: I had asked Businger's teacher to see me in Zurich. It was at the Hotel DuLac, and since he had no time to come to San Francisco, he highly recommended Toni. Toni had been a monk; he had lived in a monastery, and then he decided to use his talents outside of the monastery. I saw his work in Hamburg where he was a resident designer.

Toni had a wonderful feeling for esthetics, but I think he had some problems with technical matters. There was a certain performance of La Cenerentola in Hamburg where nothing worked because it simply was too complicated.

But here, when he designed for us, it mostly worked well, and I enjoyed him personally. We had a very friendly relationship and we spent some time together when he was in the States or I was in Europe, even when he was not working for San Francisco Opera, because we enjoyed each other's company.

Pfaff: He was a very young man when you met him.

Adler: Yes.

Pfaff: In his twenties?

Adler: I think so. He was a man who depended a great deal on his teacher and a great deal on his parents, specifically his mother. He was a mother's boy. I knew the parents also, and I used to call her when I came to Zurich, even when he wasn't there.

Now, a rather fussy director like August Everding used Businger a lot, because he liked his good taste. Some of his designs were exquisite. He has done, to my knowledge, quite a bit of work at the Bregenz Festival, where they produce opera on the lake, on the Bodensee.

The Businger Butterfly of 1966 and Teresa Stratas

Pfaff: I know his 1966 Butterfly production is still being used by the company.

Adler: I'll tell you something. I wasn't quite happy with his Butterfly. It was not so big, but it gave a big impression, which I didn't like, and then there were some colors, which may, to some degree, have been authentic, but it just didn't appeal to my sense of color. Yet we used it, and, as you rightly said, it is still being used at the San Francisco Opera. It had a certain charm. The stagehands didn't like it. The prop people complained there were too many blossoms on the trees and too many flowers. But somehow it filled a lot of the stage. We turned the angle between acts II and III, and I think that helped some. But I remember we experimented a lot with that set.

Pfaff: They're still playing it with the house at an angle.

Adler: Yes, but no two seasons had it the same. [laughs] But I must tell you, I think with pleasure on my relationship with Toni and his talents.

Pfaff: Only one or two seasons thereafter he did a Magic Flute for you, too. What do you remember of that production?

Adler: We did not have much luck with Magic Flute. I think some remnants of the production were still used when I conducted it the last time. But it wasn't quite right. The Magic Flute is a very difficult thing to resolve.

Pfaff: Before we get completely away from the Butterfly, I want to ask you about Teresa Stratas. She has accumulated a reputation now as a somewhat unreliable singer. It sounds from Bloomfield's description that she was exactly the reverse then.

Adler: I remember this very difficult personality. But we were on friendly terms and still are. She had a boyfriend here during the Butterfly (whom I don't wish to name), and that affected her entire attitude.

I think she is a very strong artist and certainly well suited for Butterfly. She has branched out to other things, more dramatic parts. She sang parts like Nedda, which in Europe is sometimes done by coloraturas and sometimes by dramatic sopranos. She sang Carmelites, if I am not mistaken. She certainly sang Lulu, where the demands are enormous, as to size and range. Then she got very much involved in the Mother Teresa problem in India.

Teresa Stratas is an artist I like very much whom I could not use as much as I really wanted to, because she was not available. She had confidence in me, though, and I remember seeing her once on the stage of the Prinzeregenten Theater in Munich during some auditions. I was sitting on the stage and there in the wings Teresa was standing. I did not recognize her. Then she asked me a very difficult personal question, although I hadn't seen her in a long time. So that shows that the results of our association were very good. Didn't she sing in Bohème here?

Pfaff: Yes, she did. She sang with Carreras in 1973.

Adler: She and Carreras became good friends, and it was a highly emotional Bohème, I remember. I had my doubts about the Salome film and I think I was right about this. Of course, in the film, she could do it, just as Rysanek, who will sing in the film of Elektra, but never do the role on the stage.

Stratas did Salome as a type. It was very difficult, because she never worked with Böhm on the film. She wasn't at the recording. She wasn't free at that time and she dubbed the part of Salome into the recording, which had been made without the voice of Salome. These are things which I really don't like, because I believe that the personal contact between a singer and a conductor in a performance must be so close and so strong. I don't remember if Teresa saw Böhm at all to run over the part. I believe she didn't. But certainly she sang differently from what she would have done if Böhm had been facing her in the pit or in the recording studio.

Pfaff: Rysanek told me that she had the same experience with Ligendza, who wasn't there for the taping of Elektra for the film. And Ligendza dubbed in later and she had to sing with no Chrysothemis.

Adler: Not the entire opera, because I attended one of these sessions. I have the last photographs made of Böhm with Ligendza in the background. But you know how it is. The availability of artists is a problem nowadays.

Pfaff: Can you remember roughly when that started becoming a problem? I remember when you first came here, you were engaging singers roughly a year ahead. Now they are talking five years ahead.

Adler: If they are talking five years ahead, then they are foolish, because nobody knows what a singer will be five years hence. We are talking about physical things. The voice today may be different in three years, and certainly in five years--we hope so. We hope that the voice will have progressed, but it could also have been abused. This whole jet business has naturally changed the entire opera profession. Nowadays, a singer who doesn't have contracts which cause him to jet from one place to the next in a hurry feels that he is not up on top. There are few singers who can resist this temptation.

The Boris Godunov of 1966 and Chester Ludgin

Pfaff: One of the people who also figures in the '66 season is Chester Ludgin. He sang the Boris for you, and one of the things Bloomfield says is what a stalwart he was for you through the years. What do you remember of your association with Ludgin?

Adler: A very friendly one. He was a very cooperative man. He had the advantage of being very, very tall, and therefore very impressive on the stage. He had a lot of expression. I don't think he was the ideal Boris, and if I am not mistaken, he replaced someone.

Pfaff: George London.

Adler: But Chester was a man who never let you down. When you needed something, he would do it. Like the Boris.

Chester's voice was not a real bass-baritone voice. It was a baritone, and, therefore, as a type he was wonderful in Boris. But vocally, under proper circumstances, he should not have done it.

Pfaff: If I am not mistaken, the first time I heard him was when you cast him in The Angle of Repose in '76. He certainly was singing impressively then.

Adler: He did a very good job. He sang a large number of roles here, and also at City Opera. I don't know if he ever sang at the Met.

Pfaff: I am not aware of it. Is there anything that you specifically remember about the Yannopoulos designs for that?

Adler: I have a very faint recollection of the Coronation Scene. He wanted platforms, which were improvised for the Coronation, but from what I know about Russia, I don't think that a Czar would have wanted his Coronation on such a primitive platform and not covered with beautiful materials. I remember it was very crude.

Yannopoulos was a very good director, but one had to watch him, because he could easily expand into something, then not come to the crux of the whole thing. He was one of the most knowledgeable stage directors--he knew a lot, he read a lot, and he was one hell of a nice guy, and very well liked by the artists. It wasn't easy to work with him because of his being disorganized, but he often had very good results. And I thought during those days, between Paul Hager and Dino Yannopoulos, I had two stage directors that were very different but who suited the San Francisco Opera very well at that time.

Western Opera Theater: 1966-1967

Pfaff: At about the same time, 1966-67, Western Opera Theater got underway. What was your purpose? Why did you want to start Western Opera Theater?

Adler: There was a double purpose. One was to bring opera to people and to places where opera was not available. Two, to develop young artistic talent--not only singers, but other crafts of opera. In the beginning of Western Opera, I hoped that I could get more experienced conductors and directors, which was difficult.

I had this idea for a long time, and then it was Roger Stevens, head of the National Endowment for the Arts, who helped me get it off the ground. Someone asked me, when I talked about this dream of mine, whether I had talked to Roger Stevens? And I asked, "Who is Roger Stevens?"

Well, when he came to San Francisco a few weeks later, I called him. We met on a Sunday afternoon at his hotel, and the meeting was a long one. He showed a great deal of interest, but he did not commit himself. Next morning at a press conference, to my surprise, I read in the paper that, when someone asked him what is the National Endowment going to do for this area, Roger Stevens said, "Kurt Adler developed some very interesting plans yesterday and the Endowment will support this." So I called him and thanked him.

He went to Stanford to make a speech two days later. I drove to Stanford, and he said, "You must come to Washington very soon to finalize this." And, sure enough, after a very short time, I was asked to come to Washington, and I had my first grant from the National Endowment--enough to give Western Opera its start.

The interesting thing was that it was the year of the Watts riots in Los Angeles, and when I was in Washington, Roger Stevens asked me if I thought that Western Opera could perform in Watts. I said, "I don't see why not." So we did a Così fan tutte, of all things, in Watts. There was a mixed audience in the auditorium, blacks and whites, and it was not very well attended, but it was very successful.

I remember a little incident. After the performance, a black boy ran on the stage, curtain open, and tried to act or to pose, whatever. I asked him, "What are you doing?" He said, "I want to see how it feels to be an opera singer." I never forgot this kid.

On the Road with Western Opera Theater

Adler: The Western Opera started traveling. We didn't perform in San Francisco at first because that wasn't the purpose. But the company traveled and I remember that some management agents wanted to book Western Opera for us and I declined this. I don't know now if I was entirely right, because I think that now Western Opera is booked by agents, but at that time I felt much different--that if you get a subsidy from the National Endowment for the Arts, you should not get into the commercial field, and use the booking agents.

I didn't want Western Opera Theater or WOT to travel too far away from the West, because, as I said before, I was awed by the size of the country, which really is a continent. And I thought if there was a need for the type of performances Western Opera could deliver, they should possibly be done by another organization in the Midwest or in the East.

I supported full-heartedly Western Opera going to Alaska, and I went up there with them once because I think that is Western territory.

I was in Anchorage for a co-production of The Crucible, with the Anchorage Opera. Those experiments were very helpful, and now the Anchorage Opera is functioning very well on its own.

After the performances in larger cities, we sent also small groups, ensembles, to smaller places which couldn't afford an orchestra and which couldn't afford a large company. In the beginning Western Opera operated without a chorus, and to do Bohème without a chorus is very difficult. But Ghita Hager, who was with Western Opera at that time, made an arrangement so skillfully that it was possible to perform La Bohème without the chorus.

Once in a while we used local choruses. I recall a WOT production of Elixir of Love in Palm Springs, where the chorus was sung by students of the College of the Desert in Palm Desert. The conductor and the stage director went down there ahead of time and worked for a couple of weeks with the chorus, and then the artists came. The whole thing was put together in Palm Springs. We brought a pickup orchestra from Los Angeles.

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Adler: I was there with Eugene Ormandy, who sat with me. It was nothing to be ashamed of. Of course, a production that would cost very little, was small enough to be put on a truck, and which was practical enough to be set up on any stage where scene changes did not take long and would not need too many people was an interesting task for a stage designer--also for a stage director.

One of the first performances of the Western Opera Theater was in Sacramento, and the next night was in Grass Valley. I came and there were quite a few stagehands setting up the set. I was amazed that they were all in uniform, dressed alike. I had seen this only in La Scala in Milan, where stagehands wore coveralls. When we talked about loading the truck after the performance, I was told those stagehands were not available--they had to leave before dark. I asked why. Well, they were the inmates of the local prison! They were very nice guys, and I chatted with them for a long time.

But it took skill and knowledge of what one could show audiences throughout the land. I remember one season we had a Traviata. I liked that Traviata very much, but the stage director had some strange ideas. We were playing it in contemporary clothes--blue jeans and whatnot, and I heard that somewhere in Wyoming a complaint was made to the Endowment, that what had been shown to them was not really Traviata. I felt that there was really a point to the complaint. In that little town they probably never had heard or seen Traviata before, and it gave the wrong picture.

I then went to Salt Lake City, where this Traviata was shown too, and I asked for a rehearsal, in spite of the fact that they had had a large number of quite successful performances. I had

succeeded in getting different costumes--also contemporary but, I had the feeling, less offensive. I asked a member of the cast to address the audience before the performance, and tell them this was a rather progressive Traviata which had had big success in various cities--but less success in smaller communities. And I said, if [the townspeople] wanted to, we would discuss the performance, a discussion in which the cast, the audience and I would participate. Well, this little speech helped in the small communities; the Salt Lake audience gave it a big hand afterwards. They liked the performance.

Traveling companies cannot show productions of luxury. It is impossible. But they don't have to show productions which cause a problem.

A Bad-Luck Traviata

Adler: I didn't always have luck with Traviata. Once Beverly Sills wanted me to go to Teheran with her to conduct Traviata--and then the whole thing didn't work out because she asked for too much money. I had cancelled a Fledermaus in Teheran, and very shortly after that, Beverly called me from New York and asked me, "What are you doing in May?"--or June, whatever it was--and I said, "I'm free. Why?" She said, "Well, I would like you to do some Traviatas for me." I said, "Where?" She said, "Teheran." I said, "I'm not so sure they want me, because I have cancelled Fledermaus." But she had asked such a high fee that the whole thing collapsed. Even in Teheran, where there was a lot of money in those days, they wouldn't engage her.

To me the thing was very interesting because a friend of mine in Vienna had married a friend of the Shah in the thirties, and they had the idea that I should go to Teheran and start an opera company there. Later Lotfi Mansouri worked there, and he was supposed to be the director of the Fledermaus, but he cancelled. When he cancelled, I cancelled too.

Tailoring Western Opera Theater Productions

Pfaff: What other things did Western Opera Theater do to make opera accessible to western audiences, besides doing operas in English. Were they routinely cut, for example?

Adler: Yes, they were cut. I do not necessarily belong to the [group of] people who say that you have to perform operas uncut. Some composers, after studying the reaction of the public here and there, and also learning their own work better, may agree to cuts. This idea that everything has to be from A to Z the way it was written is not necessarily something that I subscribe to all the time. Now, in Verdi, every bar has to be played--including some bars which may not be by Verdi--in order to get new royalties and whatnot. I'm not so sure that this is necessary.

Let's take an opera like Meistersinger. Meistersinger uncut takes over five hours. Unless you are at the Bayreuth Festival, or another Wagner festival, it is difficult for the audience to sit for more than five hours in a theater. I think that to make some sensible cuts is no sacrilege.

Pfaff: Were there other ways Western Opera Theater tailored operas for this particular audience?

Adler: Tailoring was done for the performances. After all, they had a portable stage, which was very small, and when they played in halls where there was no stage, they set up their own stage. Then there was the chorus problem, and the lighting. We got better lighting equipment as the years passed.

As is known, there is now the Texas Opera Theater, which was very much patterned after Western Opera Theater, and then there are many bigger companies which have studio companies or companies which they send on tour in the States. But Western was, as far as I know, the first one.

Pfaff: Since your other purpose was to develop young talent, can you think of some people who were developed in Western Opera Theater who have gone on to become important operatic artists?

Adler: Hmmm. Larry Cooper was a baritone who sings a great deal in various places. Allan Monk, for instance, was a very important member of WOT and has been at the Met now. And there are others. Again, my history and my statistics are not the best.

Pfaff: How did you find your young artists for Western Opera Theater?

Adler: There were auditions specifically for Western Opera Theater, and we watched the Merola Opera Program. It worked both ways.

Pfaff: Did you do any auditioning while you were traveling?

Adler: Oh, yes, but we used only American singers for WOT. We did not use British singers, or directors or artists. It was strictly

American. The structure of the company was such that I felt that this was a must, given the subsidies from the government. I had in the States never had subsidies except from the City of San Francisco, bless them. But I was very proud of the fact that we were getting money from Washington. At that time, Washington didn't give very much money for opera. It was on rare occasions. So the whole philosophy in this company was such that there had to be young American singers, conductors, stage directors, etc.

Pfaff: One thing I wondered about Western Opera Theater was whether there was one company or a number of companies.

Adler: It was one company. When I started Western Opera Theater, I had the feeling it was more of a studio effort, and I did not expect that the unions would descend on us. The first union which came was the American Guild of Musical Artists, and we had to negotiate a contract for minimum rates. The artists were on weekly fees, at a minimum guarantee of time, and, later on, per diems. Then the other unions came, naturally, the Musicians Union, the Stagehands Union, and that gave the company a more professional feeling than it would have if it had been a nonunion studio.

I must say that the unions were cooperative. They did not hold us up. Yet, it cost more than I hoped it would cost. It always does.

Pfaff: Were there other sources of funding besides the Endowment?

Adler: Yes, later on there were certain corporations or business firms which sponsored it. For instance, when we performed in San Francisco, that was really more or less a showcase to let the people hear, see, and know what Western Opera Theater really was like. That was sponsored by a local firm, and we performed various places, such as the Palace of Fine Arts. Later on, when Spring Opera Theater performed there, people didn't like it at all. But with Western Opera, it worked fairly well.

Brown Bag Opera: 1974

Adler: At the same time, Western Opera also furnished things for Brown Bag Opera. Something I was very proud of: we did The Threepenny Opera for Brown Bag on the streets of San Francisco. We were allowed to block off a city square, and there we did The Threepenny Opera, by Kurt Weill, on three trucks. As I recall, the late Calvin Simmons conducted, and very well. It was great fun, because he dressed up for this occasion in a costume of some kind.

Brown Bag was a followup on Western Opera. One of the differences was we hoped not to have to charge anything for Brown Bag, while Western Opera cost a little bit. Brown Bag was never with orchestra, while Western Opera was frequently with orchestra, a good group of musicians who called themselves the Western Opera Theater Orchestra. Some were members of the San Francisco Opera Orchestra. I tried not to play simultaneously San Francisco Opera and Western Opera, or Spring Opera, so that I was able to use young artists in the bigger companies if they were ready for it. Naturally, if they had to be sent on the road, or on the streets of San Francisco, this would not have been possible.

Pfaff: So Brown Bag was an outgrowth of Western Opera Theater and its success?

Adler: It was a followup somehow. It was a success. We played, for instance, in California Hall here, a German hall, and I remember it was necessary to charge something, so we charged fifty cents admission--and people could also buy sandwiches. Sandwiches were \$1.50 or \$1.75.

There's a philosophy that people do not appreciate what they do not pay for. I'm not quite sure it is so, but my advisors always told me so, and I followed their advice. The people had to pay something, but whether they liked it better or not, I really don't know.

Brown Bag Opera was practically without scenery, usually with one piano. Western Opera, when they had no orchestra, used two pianists as a rule. The two pianists worked on the scores to give a good picture of what the total score really was like; it wasn't an improvised thing.

I commissioned for Brown Bag Opera [a piece] called Emperor Norton by Henry Mollicone. It was for three instruments, and we did it near City Hall for the first time, and it was quite successful, because it is a San Francisco story.

The Face on the Barroom Floor was written for Central City [Colorado], and is now being performed in other places. It was a strong little piece, which I heard in Central City, where the painting of that woman is really on the barroom floor.

Douglas Moore's Carry Nation: Spring Opera Theater, 1967

Pfaff: That same season you started Western Opera Theater, you did Douglas Moore's Carry Nation in Spring Opera.

Adler: But that was at a time when we still performed in the opera house. The piece was suggested to me, and I had the feeling it was worth trying. But again I must say that the opera house was really not the right spot, because the production had to be too big there. I think such works nowadays are first tried in workshop productions, and then, maybe, in smaller surroundings.

Pfaff: Was it a brand new piece when you did it?

Adler: Yes. I think it was the world premiere [by a professional company]. [Frank] Corsaro staged it. I don't remember at the moment who conducted.

Pfaff: Grossman.

Adler: Herbert Grossman was also the musical director of Western Opera Theater for a while. Very skillful conductor. He conducted also in the fall season. I think I mentioned before that he conducted The Turn of the Screw skillfully, and also in the opera house for Spring Opera.

Pfaff: Was this the only time you worked with Corsaro?

Adler: Yes, to my recollection. At that time, I respected this very strong talent. I really wasn't very happy with the way he treated his singers or stagehands at that time. I think he has learned better now.

Taking American Works on Tour

Adler: I think that the idea of Western Opera, the philosophy of Western Opera, has done quite a bit of good for the development of opera throughout the States, at least in the West. They performed throughout California and Oregon, Washington, Alaska. They performed on Indian reservations, and I remember hearing with pleasure that, after they had been on one reservation, the Indians said that they wanted to give a show for them--which they did.

I'm in favor of encouraging traveling organizations like Western Opera or Texas Opera to perform contemporary American work,

and trying to get the Endowment to subsidize this effort, because it needs subsidy. I wish that when those organizations are engaged for a standard work, they would insist that the evening after the standard work, they perform a contemporary work, maybe at smaller prices. I thought at first for free, and then I was told again, people don't believe in what they get for free. All right. Let them charge less, and the Endowment should make up the difference.

I have also advocated that such touring organizations should help to raise money locally, that besides giving a performance, perhaps they should participate in a fol-de-rol the day before the performance to help with the performances afterwards. Of course, all those organizations give workshops and master classes in schools when they perform, and I think that should be supported as much as possible.

Gunther Schuller's The Visitation: 1967

Pfaff: The following fall, 1967, you also had another modern work, Gunther Schuller's The Visitation. Did you see the Hamburg premiere?

Adler: No. I had not seen it. I had heard a great deal from my spies, as they're called, and the Hamburg Opera did it in New York at the Met. I went through the score quite closely, and I felt that it was an opera that should be heard. One reason was that I have always felt, and still feel, that jazz is a part of American music and Gunther Schuller used jazz quite a bit in The Visitation. So that attracted me. And, then, of course, I knew the story, and I was fascinated by the whole idea.

Paul Hager, who staged it, had a very interesting idea. The sets were all pipes, metal pipes, with no painted scenery, and the public didn't quite know what to do with the piece. Maybe that was again the case that [after] a few years it would have done better, I don't know. But it certainly was a worthwhile task, in my book, and Simon Estes was excellent in the leading role.

Did Schuller conduct it?

Pfaff: Yes.

Adler: I remember we were looking for the saxophone player. We wanted this specific saxophone player, and we went to all kinds of trials to find a man who was playing here in San Francisco, and we found him, finally.

Gunther was a person where the effort of cooperation was really a nice thing. Later on he conducted Ariadne auf Naxos [1969] and the Triple Bill: Kurt Weill, Schoenberg, and Milhaud [1968]. I wish he would have told me that it was too much, because it really was too much for one evening. But I think very highly of Gunther. He was an excellent musician, and I do not regret having done The Visitation. It was a very large cast, not easy for the orchestra or singers or the total production. But I'm glad I did it.

I am not sure if the success would not have been bigger if Hamburg had not performed it at the Met before. I don't think the reaction in New York was very strong, but when San Francisco audiences form their own opinion, it's a different story.

Beginning a New Ring: 1967

Pfaff: That same year you started your Ring with Skalicki with the first installment of Rheingold. Was that an usual way to do the Ring, an opera at a time?

Adler: Most theaters do one of the operas, or maximum two, of the Ring in one season--especially here, where the seasons were not too long. You cannot do too many without tiring out the orchestra, the principals and the stagehands in one season. After you have done them all, you can naturally do the Ring and that is the way it was meant by Wagner.

Pfaff: You mentioned the production had to be on a lower budget than you had in mind. What are the kinds of things Skalicki did to accommodate that budget; how did he mount Rheingold?

Adler: I don't remember. I have seen Rheingold too frequently, recently. The last production was a borrowed production with a swimming pool, you know, and so on. Here everything was much simpler, and with certain things we succeeded and with certain things we did not succeed.

Skalicki at his best came with stark designs, which you would not expect of him as a person. He came up with all kinds of stark scene effects or designs, not really Wieland Wagner's style, but there was a lot of scenery and we just didn't have the money. In those days I didn't get much money from private sources, so one had to be modest. We tried to improve lighting and lighting equipment continuously, and [Paul] Hager and Ghita Hager were very good at lighting for those days. They did a good job, and Wolfram Skalicki

used projections--the way I think it should be used, as part of lighting, not replacing scenery.

I recall that I was not happy with the first scene. We never quite got the right thing. Any company should always make progress, but there we were really beginning to make progress.

Pfaff: Was this Ring one of the productions that was influenced strongly by the famous Bayreuth "disk"?

Adler: We had an oval. Yes, I think it was all right, although I said it before, Wieland without Wieland is not right. An elevation of this kind limits the use of the big stage because it is very hard to decide where the singers come down from.

Luciano Pavarotti's 1967 San Francisco Opera Debut as Rodolfo

Pfaff: There are a number of important debuts in the '67 season. In retrospect none is more important than the debut of Luciano Pavarotti [as Rodolfo]. I wonder when you first heard Pavarotti, and I am also curious where he was on his ascent to superstardom at this point.

Adler: He was still a young, very successful singer, and not as heavy as later on. I think one doesn't always praise enough the musical flair this man has. He has a great musical flair. His phrasing, his use of vocal colors, and, at that time, the freshness of his voice, was overwhelming. I don't remember if I had heard him before; I think I heard him in Dallas or somewhere before he came here. Not at the Met, if I am not mistaken. We always got along very well. Of course, the entire personality of Luciano is such that he can run away with audiences and already as a young artist he was able to do this. Did Mirella Freni make her debut that year?

Pfaff: Yes, in the same production of La Bohème.

Adler: The two were both from Modena, and she said that she remained little because they had the same wet nurse--and Pavarotti drank so much milk that there was not enough left for her. But they were great friends, and they made a wonderful couple, too.

Pfaff: Had they already made the famous recording of Bohème with Karajan at that point?

Adler: I doubt it.

Pfaff: She had done the film.

Adler: I don't think so, and actually when I heard Karajan rehearse Bohème at the opera in Vienna, it was Freni and Carreras. It wasn't even Pavarotti. I conducted a concert of the two of them in San Juan, and I remember it with great pleasure.

Freni is a superlative artist. She is so modest in her attitude, and she never plays the star or anything. Yet, in concerts in San Juan, she tried the two Aida arias, and I had said to her--that was after Karajan had asked her to sing Aida in Salzburg--I said to her, "Mirella, if you promise me not to sing the whole role, let's do the two arias in San Juan." After hearing the reaction of the audience, and the way she did the two arias, I said to her, "How can I stop you?" "Ritorna vincitor" was just irresistible, I must say. Of course, she has her standard repertory, which is so good. But that was new, and it worked so well. I don't remember who conducted Bohème here.

Pfaff: Mario Bernardi.

Adler: Mario Bernardi is a very good musician, and not a conventional conductor. I had heard some work of his in England and liked what I heard. I heard also Hansel and Gretel. But he was not a man to conduct a traditional Bohème.

About Superstardom

Pfaff: I know that Pavarotti was by no means the first stellar tenor, and there have long been tenors doing the kind of thing he does. It seems that, before, the real superstars of opera were the women. Was there any precedent for a tenor just taking off on top of everyone, like Pavarotti did?

Adler: Well, I think that [Alfredo] Kraus was a very great artist. He was not the showman which Luciano Pavarotti was already. He has it within him. Kraus is a great refined artist. I am sorry that he did not sing here so much, but he did not want to fly. And you have the problem of long train rides, which some artists don't like.

This superstar business came up in more recent years. But earlier there was [Nicola] Rossi-Lemeni, also the Russian basses you know, Chaliapin. I don't know if the superstar system is good. It existed. Caruso was definitely a superstar.

Lily Pons, in later days, certainly was a superstar--probably would be now a superstar. So was Birgit Nilsson.

Pfaff: I am glad to hear you say that you feel that there is also something different to this modern concept of the superstar. How did that come about? Have you any idea?

Adler: I think it has to do to some degree with the mass media. More and more people heard the individual singer on the radio, on television, on recordings. The newspapers spread the name, the radio spread the names, and it meant something to people who had never heard about them. I mean if Pavarotti nowadays sings in gambling places, it certainly makes him known more and more to crowds which otherwise would not know who he is. Placido Domingo announcing the Oscar winners--

I remember Grace Moore sang at the lake front in Chicago for a concert I conducted, and there were more than 300,000 people--and that was in 1940, if you please. Grace Moore had a little bit of Hollywood in her and also had the allures of a superstar. The next was Lily Pons; then, gradually, more and more.

More About Luciano Pavarotti

Pfaff: I think one of the other things that sets Pavarotti's career here apart from everyone else is the sheer number of new roles that he undertook here.

Adler: I had confidence in him and had the courage to let him sing new roles here for the first time. Sometimes I had to send a coach to him in spring and summer to make sure that he would learn the role, because I experienced sometimes that he needed a lot of work at the last moment. But then, a lot of other singers did, too. All singers have an opera company where they like to sing roles for the first time, and Luciano liked to sing here for the first time.

Pfaff: Why do you think he chose this company?

Adler: Because I think there was a very good feeling here to start with, whether it was the administration, or me, or the stage with the stagehands, or the orchestra. He just had lots of friends, and that gives a good atmosphere to try something new. Also, the San Francisco season was early in the fall, and he spent some time in those days at home in Modena. That's where he studied. He also went to Milan to study, because he sang mostly Italian roles. Yet

I have heard him in Gounod's Faust at La Scala--in Italian--with Freni, I think. But he sang a large number of roles here for the first time: Calaf, Manrico, Riccardo, Enzo, Radames, Fernando. That shows that he sang many years here, really, because he never sang more than one role for the first time in one season.

Pfaff: I am sure there must have been a great deal of give and take between the two of you, discussing new roles he would undertake here. Was he usually the leader, in saying he wanted to sing something new, or did you push him into new roles?

Adler: No, I didn't push him. It is very rare that, when you push an artist into a role, he really will do it successfully. I must say that if you believe that an artist should sing a role--and he doesn't want to sing it--you are better off if he sings it somewhere else first. Let him get over it. There were cases where I pushed artists, and it never felt quite right.

Pfaff: Did you ever talk him out of singing a role that he wanted to do?

Adler: No, I don't think so, not as far as I know. Pavarotti is very intelligent, and when you talk to a man with such musical feeling and remarkable vocal technique, you usually can get what you should get.

Pfaff: Have you talked about a possible Otello?

Adler: No, not that I remember. We have talked about a Rossini Otello once or twice. But I don't think we talked about the Verdi Otello.

I had asked Placido Domingo to sing Lohengrin at that time and he didn't want to do it. He was afraid of his German, I think. But I understand that in Vienna, where he sang Lohengrin the first time, his German was praised very highly. Of course, he grew also since our conversations.

Well, when you are friendly with artists, you sit with them, you chat, all kinds of things come up. But they don't always come out.

Two 1967 Debuts: Nicolai Ghiaurov and Ingvar Wixell

Pfaff: We should take a few minutes to talk about Nicolai Ghiaurov.

Adler: Mr. Ghiaurov in his best days was one of the biggest, darkest, most beautiful bass voices. Great interpreting, in his way. Very strong. I still think that Boris was his strongest role. Mephisto. The typical star roles for a bass. He had to be handled carefully, because he was very quick to react, which might have been positive or negative. One had to be aware of this.

He didn't sing here that frequently. He didn't like to go so far west. He preferred to put his feet into the Atlantic Ocean instead of the Pacific Ocean.

Pfaff: It seems to me that more and more he and Freni appear in the same city.

Adler: But unfortunately not in my days, no. That is a more recent development.

Pfaff: Were they not married then?

Adler: I don't think they are.

Pfaff: Are they not married now?

Adler: I don't know.

Pfaff: Oh, I thought they were.

Adler: Freni is, I'm sure, Catholic. She had been married before. She is a mother and grandmother--you wouldn't believe it.

Pfaff: No.

Adler: Ghiaurov certainly was married. I remember visiting Ghiaurov in the hospital in Milan after an appendix operation. A very sensitive man, very sensitive--beautiful singer and artist, but he doesn't have a very large repertoire. Did he sing Don Quichotte in Chicago?

Pfaff: Yes.

Adler: Which unfortunately I never gave him. I should have.

Pfaff: Well, no one will ever fault you for not having done your part for the Massenet revival.

Adler: Don Quichotte, I was flirting with the idea, but I tell you, I saw it in Chicago and in one way I wasn't sure that it was right. I wasn't sure about putting a lot of money into a production of this opera. Later on it may have come around because it became easier to raise money.

But there were other roles that, if Chiaurov would have done them for me, I would have done: L'Amore dei Tre Re. That is a role which, if he had got the taste of it, he could have done very well. L'Amore dei Tre Re was very popular, both here and in Chicago, at one time. Of course, Pinza was irresistible in this.

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Pfaff: Ingvar Wixell made his U.S. debut in L'Elisir d'Amore that same year. I know he's an artist you esteem highly.

Adler: Wixell made a very successful debut as Belcore in L'Elisir here. He showed an excellent sense of humor in his part. Excellent singing, excellent acting. He has, since then, branched out into the Verdi baritones, and Scarpia. He has also done Marcello in La Bohème. He said I let him do all kinds of funny things, which I don't remember. But I remember his Tonio in I Pagliacci, which was very interesting. With Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, it was, in my opinion, a very sure-fire production. The Cavalleria, I don't know.

Ponnelle is doing a new Pagliacci in Vienna--I think with Zancanaro. I had Zancanaro here, but perhaps it was a little too soon. He is now very successful. The same is true of the Spanish tenor [Juan] Pons, who is singing all over now in the biggest houses, top roles. And [Guillermo] Sarabia is one of the leading baritones.

Wixell has the great advantage of being a good actor. I don't know if everybody makes this contact with him, but I remember with pleasure when we did the Rigoletto together, the contact was a very close one. Without too much rehearsing or talking very much--there it was. That's the way it should be between a singer and a conductor. He also sang Mozart--the Count in Figaro--and he did the Count's aria in a [Golden Gate] Park concert. I don't think I ever [conducted] Scarpia with him. He is very good company, amusing.

We've neglected talking about spouses. His wife is a lot of fun. The two of them are good friends of mine. They make their home now in Monaco.

I think that Wixell sang most in West Berlin. He lived there and sang his entire repertoire there. He spent a lot of time there before he traveled as much as he does now. I would say he belongs to the top baritones of our day. He doesn't sing so much in Sweden. When I first brought him, I never brought singers for just one role. Did he sing Marcello?

Pfaff: He must have.

Adler: In those days we had many Bohèmes. The time came when we couldn't sell a Bohème, because we had given it so much, I think, but he was a very good Marcello.

You know, actually, Schaunard is almost more important than Marcello. I would at all times try to convince a top personality to sing Schaunard. One of the interesting Schaunards was Sir Geraint Evans, in his earlier days. It is a role that baritones should sing when they are more mature, because it is so good and so interesting.

Adler in Rehearsals

Adler: [Reflecting on how he got "results":] In important rehearsals, I always had secretaries sitting with me. And completely spontaneously, I said certain things, and they were taken down. I studied them afterwards, and if I felt that it was the right thing, I would talk to the artists about them--not just performing artists, but conductors and stage directors and so on. It was important to me to be on friendly terms so I could talk about those things. It created bonds between artists and myself which helped their performances and the company. And perhaps my ego, I don't know.

They always tell the story that I would notice little things on the stage--if a chorister was coming on the stage with red fingernails when she shouldn't have. Or the shoes were wrong. Details, when you add them up, matter. Saying, "That's only a small detail," I never believed in this. I think that you don't spend unnecessary time on the small details, but you should make corrections if you feel they are needed.

I liked to sit in lighting rehearsals and watch, even when they set the cues. I talked to the lighting designer about what I saw. Sometimes it was right, and sometimes it was not, and I believe that I never felt offended when what I thought should be done was not done.

The Triple Bill of 1968 and Darius Milhaud

Pfaff: You said you regretted the Triple Bill.

Adler: The Triple Bill was simply too much. I wanted to embrace works from Schoenberg to Weill to Milhaud. I did the second act of the Milhaud Christopher Columbus, which at that time I felt could stand on its own feet--and that was confirmed to me by others. I don't know if I wouldn't have taken the chance to do the whole Columbus later on. But I felt that Weill and Milhaud were an interesting combination, and at that time I was also looking for attendance, because doing contemporary works in those days was not conventional. The Weill [Royal Palace] was given to me by Schuller. I didn't know it, but he advocated it, and as I heard it more, I wasn't sure it was the right thing to do.

The production of Schoenberg's Erwartung was a very taxing one. I don't think that we were ready for that kind of production in those days, but it was a dream of Hager to do it. [Anja] Silja--I think--had problems with his approach.¹

The Columbus was a different story. I remember sitting in those performances and feeling it was too much. To weigh music and productions is something you learn, and I think the Columbus was a good performance, but by the time we came to it, the public was tired. If they really listened and watched, they must have been worn out.

Pfaff: Erwartung is a pretty hard act to follow.

Adler: It is.

Pfaff: Tell me about your personal acquaintance with Milhaud.

¹It was Marie Collier.

Adler: In my days at the Conservatory, on one of my first public appearances as conductor, I had conducted some of his mini-symphonies. It was a great surprise to me when I came here and he was at Mills College. We met soon, and he invited me over to his house. I'm sorry I met my wife so much later, because she had worked with his wife and with him in Aspen as a student. She knew them quite well.

He introduced me, in a strange way, to [Schoenberg's] Moses und Aron. He had a tape of it, and he invited some people to his bungalow on the Mills College campus. They had invited so many people that I went outside. The doors and windows were open, and I listened to Moses und Aron for the first time in my life, sitting outside of his little house because I couldn't bear to hear music of that magnitude and strength crowded in a small room.

That brings us to the importance of auditoriums, or size and style. Certain works don't fit in certain auditoriums. I have heard Mozart in some opera houses, especially contemporary houses, where I felt Mozart just didn't go. I have heard Wagner in auditoriums which were too small for Wagner. I believe that the tempi must be changed, depending on the size of the auditorium. Extreme tempi go better in a large auditorium, and that goes for slow tempi as well as fast tempi. Think of the long timpani solo in Walküre, for instance. You can speed up certain prestissimos in a big auditorium which, in a smaller house, you just don't do. Maybe that's just me, but that is my feeling.

Pfaff: Did you bring this up to conductors in the house over the years?

Adler: Oh, yes.

Pfaff: What kind of response did you get?

Adler: The San Francisco house is a very fortunate house. You can do Wagner. It's not too small and not too big, and it's not too big for Mozart. Therefore, you have a fairly easy time in this house, but in some of the new opera houses in Germany, when I heard Mozart I wasn't very happy. They neither looked right, nor were they appealing.

Pfaff: When you did the Christopher Columbus, was Milhaud on hand during rehearsals?

Adler: I don't remember.

Pfaff: Do you have a feeling about that generally? Is it better or not better to have a composer on hand when his piece is being done?

Adler: It depends on the composer. Some composers hear their work differently, sometimes right, sometimes wrong. You remember what I said about Mr. Imbrie. I think if Mr. Imbrie had not been able to impose his will on the conductor, the director, and me, that his work would have had more success. Because what we wanted would, I think, have been better than Mr. Imbrie's insisting on every bar.

But I remember one thing of Madeleine Milhaud. She was the speaker in Stravinsky's Persephone in New York, which was broadcast. I think it was in the Adelphi Theater on 54th Street. I attended the rehearsal, where Stravinsky himself conducted, and Madeleine was Persephone. That was why, when my personnel gave me a pig, I called my pig Persephone. It was a male pig, which we didn't know at the time.

Pfaff: I didn't know they gave you a pig.

Adler: Oh, yes. Twice.

Pfaff: What were the occasions?

Adler: I think as a birthday present, a seven-day old pig.

But I had contact with Milhaud. Perhaps more with him as a person than with his music. I never had the opportunity to perform many of his works. I seem to remember conducting one of his suites in a concert once, but not much of his music. But I saw him frequently, and admired and liked him. One thing I am grateful to him for--that he introduced me to Moses und Aron, and I'm sorry I couldn't produce it before I left.

Poulenc. Milhaud. I knew them fairly well. Strauss. Stravinsky to a lesser degree. Schuller. Imbrie. Harbison. Korngold. Krenek. I was fortunate. I learned, I think, to understand them and their music in their own right, in their own way. Dello Joio, if you want an American. I enjoyed meeting Norman. There was a Hungarian composer I knew in Vienna and Hollywood, Eugene Zador. He also was a teacher of orchestration of mine when I went to the Conservatory. I conducted one piece of his

that I liked very much, a Rondo for orchestra. He became a master orchestrator, and made a lot of money this way.

[Aribert] Reimann. There is a book about Reimann, with his statements about Lear, where the San Francisco production of Lear is very much praised. I remember sitting with Reimann in Vienna and listening to a tape of Lear from the Munich Opera. He was here for the performances, but he did not interfere or anything. I think he was quite satisfied with what he heard and saw.

XI THE DEVELOPMENT OF FUND-RAISING--THE 1970s

[Interview 12: May 9, 1985] ##

Howard Skinner, San Francisco Opera Manager, 1951-1971

Adler: I think we talked already about Howard Skinner. Skinner was originally the manager of the symphony. Then [in 1951] he became manager of the opera also, which wasn't too much of a job because I did a lot which might have been activities of the manager, but I was used to doing it.

Under Merola, the opera had had a manager, Paul Posz. Posz did a lot of strange things. He used to give recitals with the top artists--he was somehow connected with Columbia Artists--and then something happened, and he was out. The board dismissed him. I worked with Posz a lot, but I wasn't in charge of the company at that time, and I wasn't involved at all with his dismissal.

Skinner came in then, and when Skinner died, we didn't replace him. We brought in instead a chief accountant, and when he died, we didn't even replace him. It got worse and worse.

Pfaff: What was the job of the manager?

Adler: He supervised the financial activities of the company. Posz was dealing with the artists, too, otherwise I don't know how he would have gotten into the trouble he got into, which I don't want to discuss, really. He was a close friend of Lily Pons, and I think it was Pons's concerts which he put on and was attacked for. Also, the opera put on, if I'm not mistaken, six or eight recitals with top artists, and that was what Posz handled.

Now Skinner was a good public relations man because he knew everybody in the city, and he didn't negotiate with artists, so he could be on very friendly terms with them and invite them for

dinner, and whatnot, but he didn't get involved with activities other than public relations; never with administrative or artistic matters. And financially, he never would say to me that he thought we should pay more or less to some artist, and this and that. But Howard Skinner was a Renaissance man.

It would be important to find out when he died [Howard Skinner died in 1971, Ed.], because after his death we got the chief accountant, and no manager, as I said. And I was doing more and more, you see.

I liked Howard Skinner very much and we were very good friends. Being manager of the symphony and the opera was absolutely too much; I don't think anyone could do both, and when the interests of the symphony and the opera conflicted after a while he had to resign either from the opera or from the symphony, and he decided to stay with the opera.

Robert Watt Miller and the Development of Fund-Raising

Adler: Then Mr. Miller died and the financial situation of the opera changed, because Mr. Miller had always made up a lot of the deficit by very large personal contributions. I remember Mr. Miller telling me: "I wasn't born as a beggar, and I am too old to learn it now!" What he couldn't raise wasn't much if I remember right, although in those days I wasn't much involved in financial things.

I remember when Mickey Hellman was the treasurer of the company; it was when I came in in 1953 and they were trying to get legacies and such things. And then Mr. Miller was in a personal and social position to talk to certain people or certain corporations or foundations--practically personally--and to get major contributions from them. He was on the boards of many corporations and these automatically made large contributions to the opera.

When Mr. Miller died, we had to create an entirely different apparatus to raise funds, and I started getting more involved in the control of the financial situation. Max Azinoff was a terribly nice man--he had the title of controller, I think--with an uncanny sense of humor. I always had him sit with me in union negotiations, and whenever situations got tough he came up with some absolutely nonsensical joke and everybody laughed and adored him. He had retired from Fuller Paints, where he was extremely

well liked, and when he came [to the opera] he thought it was a part-time job, but as his financial responsibilities grew, and I wanted to be sure we were doing the right thing financially, he really worked, which wasn't really quite what he expected. He had no knowledge of opera, but he enjoyed it enormously, and he had fun, and it was delightful. You know when you deal with money matters of an opera company, they are unpleasant in some respects, but Max was able to put you in a good mood in spite of the serious situations one often encountered.

You asked about the 1970 Così fan tutte--that must have been the Ponnelle production.

Pfaff: Yes, it was.

Adler: I am not sure how Crocker gave it to us, but it was one of the first official sponsorships of a production that I remember, and that of course became the funding style and the fashion more and more.¹

The Gramma Fisher Foundation and Co-Productions

Adler: I think at some point we should talk about Bill Fisher, the head of the Gramma Fisher Foundation, really an outstanding help with new productions. Bill Fisher had a foundation, and "Gramma" was his mother--or his wife--but some important family member who had died and who was called "Gramma." And so Gramma Fisher Foundation in the beginning sponsored productions for the Metropolitan, Chicago, and San Francisco, and later on, there was a second group of companies. I don't know which companies belonged to it--maybe Miami and Washington, and such, but it was a foundation with a family board.

When he sponsored a production there was the stipulation that it was not to be given by only one company. In the case of Chicago, New York, and San Francisco, he wanted to be sure that all three would give his production.

In the beginning, the programs simply said "a production of the Gramma Fisher Foundation," implying that only the company which

¹Crocker-Citizens National Bank gave \$41,200 for the new production of Così fan tutte, the first new production sponsored by a local corporation.

was performing then was performing that opera, and we had some trouble agreeing on productions because I think it is quite natural that different general directors and general managers have different tastes and approach productions with different artistic means and artistic standards.

I suggested to the Gramma Fisher Foundation that they make it clear that one company had been the first to present a given production, and then one wouldn't have to agree about how the production should be done. There is one case I don't hesitate to mention because it is a production still being used at the Metropolitan, and that is the 1977 Aida.

Now Chicago didn't want an Aida, and Mr. Fisher was not going to give an Aida to the Metropolitan unless San Francisco would also present it. So I had to agree to present it and I didn't quite know what it would look like, and as it turned out this production didn't work out very well. It was not well received in New York, but since I had pledged that San Francisco would show this production, I showed it, knowing that it was not a successful production.

Bill Fisher [had given] the San Francisco Opera a production of The Flying Dutchman in 1975, and the Met showed it in 1979. Of course, the production caused a lot of controversy--it was by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle--but it was a good production, unlike this unfortunate Aida.

Mr. [John] Dexter, who was the director of the Metropolitan Aida did not come to San Francisco, and I had another director for the Aida, but she couldn't do anything with it either because it was simply a mistaken concept.

Pfaff: Was it Sonja Frisell?

Adler: Yes. I didn't mention it because she had a complete flop, too. The question is, can several general managers agree on one concept for a production? I would think not, and that is why co-production is difficult, because you have to show productions you would rather not show; and furthermore designers lose the opportunity to do new productions. This is not only a question of money, but also a question of whether designers can develop [if new productions are shared by the major companies].

Bill Fisher saw this. For The Flying Dutchman, he had pledged a certain amount of dollars, it wasn't very much, because the San Francisco Opera productions were much cheaper than the Met or

Chicago Lyric productions, and I ended up putting it on with smaller costs than budgeted, believe it or not, and I told Fisher so, and charged him X thousand dollars less than he had pledged, and that he appreciated very much.

To come back to Così fan tutte, it was an extremely lovely and charming production. It was at the period when Jean-Pierre Ponnelle did a lot in grays, which I wasn't entirely happy with, but also he directed it himself, and it was a very, very successful production. They wanted to take the production to Italy and I don't recall if we finally sent some costumes along, because it was a rather fragile production.

That brings me to something else. It has become a necessity--and I hope everyone who builds new productions that are co-productions will remember this--that when you send productions to other theaters they suffer, so you better build with excellent quality or the production will be shabby in no time. In the beginning, I cut corners and I'm afraid I cut corners too much for both artistic and technical reasons, but also I spoiled the board because the productions I built originally were cheaper than others and that is not always wise. But you learn.

There is another thing: if you use the same production in too many theaters, the interest diminishes. There are opera fans who travel, and I have heard more than once that people grow tired of seeing the same productions in San Francisco, Chicago, the Metropolitan, La Scala, and whatnot.

There are now complicated contracts with shared productions; the technical director has to go for the set-up and the lighting director. Unfortunately, stage directors do not make themselves available for repeat performances sometimes, and this is a problem with my friend Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, who frequently has very special stagings. When he doesn't come to repeat performances here and someone has to stage them, it cannot be the same. Two people will not have the same ability to put ideas over.

Pfaff: In the case of Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, was there always a production book that went along with the productions?

Adler: Yes, but production books don't do it. As I have said before, Wieland Wagner without Wieland didn't work. Jean-Pierre Ponnelle without Ponnelle doesn't work. It is just not the same. Those are perhaps the strongest cases I know of; without the presence of those men you just cannot achieve the right thing.

Lighting and Opera

Pfaff: Would you say that your own activities in fund-raising didn't really get underway until Mr. Miller's death?

Adler: Oh, yes. But as the standards became higher and as the company was more and more successful, it became easier to raise money, so my activities influenced the funding market indirectly.

Later on, it became obvious that I was able to raise money and so they let me do it. And "led" me to do it, with a "d". I was more interested in artistic problems than in money-raising problems, but I always worked with the budget, and if I am not mistaken, only twice in all the years I worked at the opera I was over budget, which is not easy.

Pfaff: You were actually famous for that--for keeping the company in the black.

Adler: Well, we broke even, as a matter of fact, and I was able to raise money. When I needed something special, let us say some new lighting equipment which we badly needed, I looked for people I knew who were interested in this field. I would invite them for lunch at the opera house and then bring them together with the chief electrician and let him explain what we could really do if we had the right equipment. And the lighting improved very much!

Pfaff: One thing I remember prior to the expanding of the pit--one of the most important changes in the house--was the upgrading of the lighting. When did you get the computer, for example?

Adler: Sir, as I have told you, I am not a historian; you must find the years someplace else. [It was 1976.] But I can tell you a story about when we went to look for a computer system of lighting, and I took a couple of people with me who really understood lighting and probably knew more about it than I did. I learned a great deal about it later on, and I had certain ideas how the lighting fit a production both artistically and musically.

Now in the case of Ponnelle, for instance, who lights himself, his lighting always suited the music--quite naturally, because he is such a musician. A lot of producers are less musical--they may be good theater producers--but one has to put one's nose on the musical necessities and match the music and the lighting. Not only

timing, but also colors are important, and when singers are too much in the dark it doesn't help their singing or help the audience to hear their voices.

Pfaff: One of the big issues about the Karajan Ring at the Met was that it was too dark. I remember Rysanek saying that it was so dark on the stage for the Karajan Ring she couldn't see her way around.

Adler: If you let singers sing in the dark, you must do it with something special in mind. The more natural and logical way is to have singers visible to the audience when they sing.

There is the question too of follow spots, special lights [focused on] the individual. The War Memorial Opera House has no built-in follow spots, and we had problems with follow spots always --even when I left there were still problems--I don't know if there are still or not. But there were structural problems because there was no way to put the follow spots in certain places in the house at the right angles to follow the singers, and the operators had to sit on pipes over the proscenium! That is an art, and we had to spend a lot of time and money to train operators because it takes a certain skill, and if the operator doesn't know exactly what a singer is going to do, he will lose him at times. In some operas follow spots are not advisable, and then one has to find area lighting, and whatnot.

All these things are very difficult and in this respect the computer switchboard is fine. All light cues are on a computer, although when something goes wrong you have to be able to change the computer on the spur of the moment. Modern houses have places for the lighting equipment, not only follow spots but all light sources, but in the War Memorial Opera House it is very difficult.

We finally started putting light sources in the back of the boxes, which is not ideal, but the original follow spots had to go through the entire house, because they came from the back of the house--somewhere behind the dress circle. This is not good, because the light source is always visible and disturbs people in certain locations of the theater. All those things had to be experimented with. I don't remember, but I don't think too much importance had been given to light originally at San Francisco Opera.

Pfaff: I remember that one of the big improvements in lighting at the San Francisco company came with the arrival of Mr. Munn, Thomas Munn, in 1976.

Adler: That was much, much later. If you want to be fair, you have to say that Ghita Hager knew a lot about lighting. Paul Hager had definite ideas about lighting--but she was the one who executed them, and she did very well. If you talk about earlier days you must talk about Leo Kurz. Leo Kurz, in the opinion of our chief electrician--George Pantages--was the best lighting man you can imagine.

At the same time, Kurz was a designer and I used him in both positions, although he did not quite have the idea of what was needed. I remember we did Francesca da Rimini and he used part of the Ponnelle Frau ohne Schatten, and it didn't work at all, because it was the kind of drama and the kind of music which really didn't [go with] the coldness of Frau, especially without Ponnelle's colors. I remember that Kurz invented some maskings--to cover the sides--and we had blue velours masking. It was stiff and later on we felt that it wasn't quite right.

Masking on the stage of an opera house is really a very difficult thing. If you have a set of valuable black velours hanging curtains to mask the side or the back, black is not always the answer. I played around a little bit with those things and to my recollection we finally owned two sets of blacks (before me they were not even velours--they were made of some very ugly materials) but then we owned black velours, blue velours, gray velours, and gold-yellow--and brown finally, too. I remember sitting in rehearsals sometimes and seeing that the designer had put--let's say--brown velours.

I listened to the music and then started playing around with color and we may have ended up with blue or gray instead of brown. I must say that Ponnelle understands it when you bring up such matters; other people don't quite follow it.

The other man in lighting who I think contributed a great deal to the opera was Wolfram Skalicki.

You mentioned Tom Munn. You come to a point where you have to have a resident lighting designer--or whatever you want to call it, titles don't matter to me. I should really make a confession here, which is that titles really don't matter to me. Probably a mistake, because some people would have been very upset if I would have given them other titles. But that was my personal negligence not to worry about titles. I think Tom Munn got his credit as lighting designer, though, and also his assistants, who also lit some shows during the season.

Tom Munn, being there for years, learned the needs of the San Francisco Opera and the War Memorial Opera House and he worked with me also. I remember often sitting with him in lighting rehearsals, where you don't use singers--you have people who walk the cues, so that you know how to light the scenes. For artistic achievement in lighting you have to give the designers enough rehearsal time. Some designers light fast and others light very well, but quite slowly, and that is a problem.

Ghita Hager did a lot of lighting, a lot of improvements and experiments, and then Tom Munn continued. He couldn't keep assistants, because they learn and then they want to light independently, which is understandable.

Pfaff: How did you select the computer system you finally used?

Adler: I took George Pantages with me when I went to New York. I remember visiting the factory, where they demonstrated some switchboards in a big hall. I stayed behind and started to play with one of those big control boards and it made an incredible noise and the working people came from all sides, running as if their baby would be killed. Fortunately I didn't ruin anything! That is something one shouldn't do, naturally, but I had seen how they did it and I wanted to try it.

Adler's Fund-Raising Style

Pfaff: Before we leave this matter of lighting, I'd like to explore further the connection between lighting and your fund-raising activities. For example, when you needed new lighting equipment and you needed to raise the funds privately. How would you go about inviting people in to see them? Let's talk about your style.

Adler: First of all, when I tried to raise money, I tried to attach the money to something I needed and not to simply say that I needed \$100,000. I told them what it was for. In the case of lighting equipment, I looked for a firm or an individual who was interested in improving the lighting at the San Francisco Opera and who was aware of the fact that the equipment we had was totally outdated and that we couldn't keep in step with other companies. I would invite that person to lunch and then bring him together with our chief electrician and let the chief electrician demonstrate what we had and what we could do, and explain what we could not do, and how it could be done with other equipment.

Sometimes I needed velours for masking, because there are people who sit in boxes who complain--they can see what is going on backstage--that we don't mask well. Then I said, "Okay, we can do better, but we need so many yards of velours that costs so much money. How about it?" This way, if you tell a person who is interested or who complains, "That's what we need and it costs so much to make it better," you can raise the money.

Pfaff: Was it complaints of that nature that got you your new lighting system?

Adler: Well, I don't think there were so many complaints, but in that case I approached knowledgeable people.

Pfaff: Can you remember who?

Adler: No. You know, to go back that far--they might not want to be reminded. Sadly enough, to give money for the arts has remained a sensitive problem. People say there are things needed that are more important than to make the arts better. I think that in the last five or ten years, it has become obvious that the arts are part of the lifestyle, and the lifestyle in the States has changed so that more and more people want to enjoy being involved in the arts.

That is the thing that hurts now that the government has cut the arts back at the same rate it cut back other things (I am talking percentage). The support of the arts is much, much smaller than the support of other things, but the importance of the arts for the life of the nation has increased immensely. The other day I read that a very large number of people said they wouldn't mind at all giving five dollars a year to support of the arts. Well, at the moment the government support--I forgot what it is--but per capita I think it is less than a dollar! It's terrible in comparison to other countries.

Pfaff: Could you explain how your fund-raising style differed when you went to a corporation for a production or when you went to an individual for a production? There are some fund-raisers who believe you go out and you ask specifically for what you need and why and others who go out and let needs be known and see if someone rises to the bait. What was your style?

Adler: Look--I tried to understand the psychology of the people and my own psychology when I was raising funds, and I liked it when people said: "One cannot say 'no' to Adler."

Let me give you an example. I will not say who it was--one of the major corporations in the city. My visit ended with the man saying: "One cannot say 'no' to Adler." At the same time, when I went to him with something else, I miscalculated his interest in this, and he said: "Not in my lifetime would I give you that! Our firm has no interest whatever in supporting that." And it was a man who had given a large amount of money several times from his corporation. I think really to understand how to approach, and with what, is the whole secret of getting it.

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Adler: I got a lot of money for Esclarmonde from an individual. That person was very much interested in showing Sutherland in a different light. And also we hadn't done much Massenet and Esclarmonde is a completely different Massenet style than the rest of his operas. But the fact that Sutherland would be in this kind of work interested this person and so I got the money for the sets.

In Mr. Miller's days, Milton Esberg--who died recently--was entrusted with fund-raising, and I tried very hard to get him to understand that I believed he would raise money more easily if he would ask for certain, special things instead of writing that the opera needed fifty thousand dollars. He may have been right in earlier days, but I think later on when you involved people more in what you were trying to do, it was probably easier to get someone to write a check.

Milton Esberg's mother was a great friend of Kirsten Flagstad's. As a matter of fact, she had a house here in Ross and I remember visiting her out here during the time she had a very close relationship with Kirsten Flagstad.

The Opera Props Department: Ivan Van Perre

Adler: You know, in the early days in San Francisco, the ladies (what would be the Opera Guild now) would bring in the props--chairs, sterling silver things, glasses, and whatnot, carpets. Naturally, the next time you do it the stuff may not be there, so it is not an artistic way of doing things and I would doubt that the periods would be the right ones, but selectively it looked very nice.

The props department is a very, very important department, and San Francisco Opera is extremely lucky to have a man like Ivan Van Perre run the department. He does a magnificent job. I remember that in the early days, though, the champagne glasses in Don Giovanni, for example, when I saw them they horrified me because they didn't belong in Don Giovanni.

Let's take instruments--we're talking about props. You have to have certain instruments which fit the time period. Take Beckmesser's lute in Meistersinger. You can't just give him a lute. I think we used a mandolin once which is all wrong because a mandolin does not give chords, and in Wagner's music you have chords. Sometimes you need a special harp in the orchestra--a very small harp, and that is a piece of goods that you find someone who is musical to get you. You can interest [an individual] in such a thing. A harpsichord--or music. The San Francisco Opera has started a music fund because some music materials you own and some you don't. The more you own the better. And of course the moment comes when you have to renew musical materials, because the parts for the orchestra get so bad they have difficulties playing from them.

The Board of Directors and Fund-Raising

Pfaff: Before we leave this matter of fund-raising altogether, who was Mr. Miller's successor as president after he died? And how did the situation change?

Adler: If I'm not mistaken, the first successor was Prentis Cobb Hale, who had been an officer of the company before and who was a very different man, a very tough man--a go-getter. But I got along with him very well. He said, and I'm quoting him now: "We fought a great deal, but we loved each other, and we always found a way of doing it."

I think he was succeeded by Bill Orrick, who at that time was a lawyer.² William Orrick--that was another Jr., if I'm not mistaken. He was a very fine man, a nice man, who in the beginning had to learn a great deal about opera--but if he had stayed he would have made an excellent president. He was, strangely enough, one of the last appointees of the Nixon administration in its last

²William Orrick was president from 1971 to 1973.

months, although he was a Democrat and an assistant attorney general in Washington under Kennedy. He became a district judge or whatever his title is, and he had to quit because there was a conflict of interests which would have made it impossible for him to stay.

Bill and I got along very well, and were very close friends, and then he was succeeded by...something occurs to me, and one would have to check this. I wonder if Mr. Miller, in his last years, didn't become chairman of the board when Hale was already president under Miller--I'm not sure.³ But to my recollection, to go back to Orrick, he was succeeded by Walter Baird, who still is president. And chairman for many years while I was there was Gwin Follis. At the time he became chairman of the opera he still was chairman of Standard Oil. A great gentleman, for whom I have the highest admiration.

There were people who would say to me: "To Gwin Follis you simply don't say 'no.'" Later on I heard them say "no" to him, but at that time the quote came from a meeting at the Bohemian Grove. They always had a very fancy luncheon where all the big shots hung out and that's where Follis and Magowan and also the Millers, fathers and sons, and so on, were. The billions you could add up there probably could have helped the opera very easily. The problem that I faced was that the board didn't participate enough in fund-raising.

It is very difficult, you know. I believe that democracy in the arts doesn't work too well, and I involved the board artistically--not in decisions--but I kept them informed at all times. They knew what I wanted to do and what I was doing. But then, everything was presented to them on a silver plate or a gold plate, and it made them very passive when it came to fund-raising, and all kind of efforts were made, but I regret to say that it didn't work so well.

One of the main reasons I retired and nobody asked me to retire--let's not say retired, let's say resigned--was that it became necessary to raise more and more and more money, and I just didn't feel that I wanted to make this my main aim in life. I started as a musician and an artist and I wanted to do just that and I was doing less and less of it. And I worked hard. My

³Robert Watt Miller became chairman when Hale became president in 1967 and remained chairman until his death in 1971.

working days were usually from ten in the morning until eleven or midnight, and there was hardly any break. More often than not I would eat lunch and dinner at my desk, if at all. But to raise money takes time, and I needed time for artistic things.

Opera Broadcasts

Adler: Well, I see a question about broadcasts. I consider broadcasts as an all-important way of making people aware of the company, and I think radio broadcasts may be more important than television broadcasts, because I am not convinced that someone who is not already interested in opera will sit in front of this box for close to three hours. Besides, the fact is, that artistically opera needs dimension and fairly large dimensions, and this twenty-five inch box is no answer. Also, I have not seen a technique of photography or broadcasting opera done in a way that satisfied me.

On the other hand, the American people have a very bad habit of letting their radios go on for hours and hours. They are used to study with the radio on. They like music as a background, which is not the right [way to listen]. But it may be that the liking of opera can be developed in the person who has the opera going even as background. I'm sure the Saturday broadcasts and the enthusiasm of the live audience makes the ears perk up of the radio audience. Even if they are not already opera lovers--they will perk up their ears and say, "What is that? There must be something emotional involved in that." That is why I believe that radio broadcasts are all-important.

Pfaff: Bloomfield points out that the 1970 Tosca was the first stereo broadcast. How long had broadcasts been going on?

Adler: Well, parts of the opening performance at the opera house of Tosca in 1932 were broadcast. It was even recorded if I'm not mistaken. But there were broadcasts of parts of that performance, and I remember the symphony broadcasts. They sponsored broadcasts for many years which were not stereo.

But, again, there is differing quality of broadcasts. It depends what lines you use to get it out of the house and throughout the country, and I was always pushing to get enough money to get a large number of quality lines. Fred Krock, who was handling our broadcasts for many years for many different networks,

did a magnificent job. San Francisco Opera was thought to be among the best, if not the best, in the field.

I think that was very important: Krock knew exactly where to put the microphones and what microphones to use and we talked about the kind of music he would broadcast, and he knew the sets and quality of microphones and lines.

I think when Krock started out with us he was with KKKH. And then we changed, switched stations and networks possibly, and so on, and I deplore very much that the opera lost the broadcasts. Maybe the fact that they are broadcasting the Ring now can make us hope they will again broadcast the season. When you are away from the city, you have people who are very unhappy that there are no broadcasts from the San Francisco Opera any more.

Pfaff: Well, wasn't it in one of your last seasons when all of a sudden the broadcasts went out all over the country--it wasn't just local--but national?

Adler: Yes. I welcomed that because I think it is very important for the company and for the art form of opera it is very important, because that is where you get a new public.

Pfaff: What is the expense involved in broadcasting? Is there an expense to the company or not?

Adler: Well, it depends on what sponsors you find and what kind of broadcast you have to give. With sustaining broadcasts, those cost less money. Of course a principal can always block you and can say, "I'm sorry, I have to have money," but I never paid it. The union agreements you make for broadcasts--that money you can usually raise. The costs are not prohibitive.

Otherwise, if you have to negotiate fees with each artist, they may be prohibitive. I think it is very short-sighted if an artist says, "Well, I have to have a lot of money for broadcasts," because the broadcast may bring other engagements, recordings, and so on. It can contribute so much that the actual value of a broadcast to an individual artist is hard to foretell. And most artists actually go along.

The unions naturally insist on certain compensations for their members--musicians and chorus, and so forth--there are very intricate union rules. I don't know where they stand now because I'm not familiar with the present contracts, but in general I

succeeded in getting understanding and cooperation, financially speaking, from the orchestra and the chorus.

Pfaff: Meaning what?

Adler: They got certain fees, but they didn't become extravagant in their demands. If there are commercial broadcasts, which we didn't have, the fees are quite high--I don't know if Texaco is commercial or not--but other companies which sponsor broadcasts are. If it is a very rich sponsor, the artists say, "They have to pay." But here the fees were really not high.

The same is true naturally for recording, and the union negotiations for television broadcasts are much more complicated, and may necessitate hiring special staff. The Metropolitan has Michael Bronson, who has the title vice president for media.

Pfaff: What makes it a commercial broadcast?

Adler: If the sponsor, whether it is a bank, or an oil firm, or a corporation, or whatnot, gets the kind of credit that is aimed to publicize them and possibly enhance their business. If you more or less just establish very short credit lines to the sponsor, then it's not commercial. You simply acknowledge the help of the sponsor and don't try to sell his wares or his prestige, or give him financial profit. It's a narrow line.

Pfaff: I'm thinking while you are talking; it is a very light way that Texaco goes about announcing their broadcasts.

Adler: I think it's commercial, Texaco. They have those ads--those incredible printed ads--in magazines and newspapers, and I don't think those would pass as sustaining broadcasts. I once knew it but I forgot.

Pfaff: Those are the two, sustaining and commercial broadcasts?

Adler: That's right. There is another thing I should mention here. When radio got interested in opera broadcasts, we tried to broadcast excerpts from the season's repertoire with singers from the Merola Program--the Merola Opera Program. After I watched this for a season or two, I came to the conclusion that the Merola Program was not artistically up to doing this, and that some of the broadcasts, which were referring to the coming season, were doing harm. People who don't know what Merola is and don't know opera would hear excerpts with piano that might turn them off, and so I suggested we find other ways, and we did.

I remember sitting in broadcast sessions in studios and sweating blood because I didn't really think that the operas that we were doing a few weeks later would be given [the best performance] by young singers who did their best, but weren't up to it.

The 1970 Tristan and Isolde: Jon Vickers and Wolfgang Windgassen

Pfaff: We've talked a little bit before about the famous 1970 Tristan and I wanted to set the historical record straight: how was it that we ended up with Wolfgang Windgassen?

Adler: Well, Vickers walked out, which was not justified in my opinion. I don't know what the real reason was why he left, because he had had the rehearsals he was promised and he knew the rehearsals he was promised he would get, because he was singing it for the first time.

But let's forget about the reasons and look at the fact that we had Birgit Nilsson and no Tristan. And she went on rehearsing without a Tristan.

Pfaff: Was it that late that he cancelled?

Adler: He was here and he had started to rehearse--he walked out of rehearsals--he left. It was a very questionable situation, to be polite.

Now there are not many singers who are singing Tristan, and certainly not many who are free. I talked to Birgit and I did my thinking, and I called Wolfgang Windgassen, who was living on a property near Stuttgart, more or less retired. He agreed to come, and of course Windgassen, even in this late stage of his career, was a personality and also in many ways a singer of the first class--as good as they come.

Birgit was awfully happy that Windgassen came, and it was a very good atmosphere and created good artistic standards, I think.

Pfaff: I was unclear about his status at the time, because I know he had sung his last Bayreuth Tristan.

Adler: I said he had more or less retired. But when a singer retires, he still sings here and there. Actually, if I remember right, he and Hager were good friends and it was Hager who directed that, and I'm sure Hager being the director helped because he knew he could work with Hager. So he agreed to come and I was delighted. It was very funny because we had Nilsson singing Isolde, and sitting in the rehearsals was Anja Silja, who had also sung Isolde.

Pfaff: She had?

Adler: Oh, yes. I have never heard Silja as Isolde and she is a very dear friend of mine, but I am not convinced that at that time at least--her voice changed, incidentally--but at that time she was really the right Isolde. But Wieland was Wieland.

Pfaff: What was it that Windgassen did that made it a special Tristan? It was the first show I ever saw in your house, and I'll never forget it.

Adler: Well, I'll tell you something. Windgassen, in spite of the fact that he worked with Wieland a great deal, was a statue instead of what we think of and talk about all the time. The statue of the Wagnerian heldentenor.

But he came to help us and saved the situation, and Nilsson exploded with joy because she had worked with him before, so the whole thing had a pleasant taste and the taste of success. It worked. I don't fault Windgassen, but you have to try to talk to him in the right mode in order to get a man like this to agree. I remember he didn't come immediately. We had to wait for him for a couple of days. And Birgit was singing duets alone.

Pfaff: It surprises me that he would be able to come out of retirement or near retirement to sing in such a large house when he had been used to Bayreuth.

Adler: Well, his technique of performing and his vocal technique was such that he could do it. This house has a fairly large capacity, but you don't have the feeling of an extremely large house. Chicago Opera--Chicago Opera House, or whatever they call it--this is an extremely long auditorium, and does not have the horseshoe shape, and that makes the singers much more nervous to see the end, or see no end, of the auditorium. But I have said this frequently, that in the War Memorial Opera House you can perform Wagner, you can perform the Ring, you can perform Mozart, and it works. Or you can do Don Pasquale. Cenerentola, for example, was an enormous

success, Ponnelle's Cenerentola, in spite of the capacity. So that is the advantage of this house.

"Gambling" with Some Young Conductors: James Levine, Riccardo Chailly, Calvin Simmons

Pfaff: Now in the same season that you had these very great veterans, you also had at least one very young talent and that was James Levine, who conducted his first Tosca for you.

Adler: Did he do Tosca first, or Butterfly?

Pfaff: It was Tosca in '70 and Butterfly in '71.

Adler: Jimmy came, and I knew him and had heard him conduct. The Tosca, the first time, went very, very well. The second time I brought him it didn't go so well. I don't know why. I don't know if he has done Butterfly since, frankly. He has done Tosca recently, and it wasn't quite successful either--the recent Tosca at the Met.

I remember Levine had a big success with his first opera, which as you say was Tosca, but that the second opera was not the best. I think he is a very, very good conductor, and I think what he did for the orchestra of the Metropolitan is absolutely magnificent. And that orchestra used not to be a good orchestra, and now it is much more than good.

I don't quite understand Jimmy sometimes. I remember I was there at a performance of Bohème on a Saturday night, and he had done Rosenkavalier in the afternoon. This is a little much. I remember I conducted once two performances in one day and I decided not to do it anymore because it's not right.

Pfaff: He is like that. He'll leave and make a recording in between sometimes.

Adler: That's probably an exaggeration.

Pfaff: It does seem to be one of the characteristics of your work as an impresario--you do take risks with young conductors. I know that you had [Riccardo] Chailly when he was in his twenties.

Adler: I met Chailly in Milan, [and engaged him for] Turandot in 1977 if you remember, which I am not sure was the right assignment. I

don't remember if he told me he preferred to conduct Verdi over Puccini, or Puccini over Verdi. Well, I couldn't offer him Verdi that year anyhow.

Pavarotti knew him and liked the idea of Chailly, but I remember that Pavarotti had problems with "Nessun dorma" in those performances, which is one of his strongest concert arias. I think that Chailly was very green, but he has made a big career and is now with the Radio Orchestra of Berlin. He is thought of very highly, and he conducted at the Salzburg Festival. I always felt that he was a very, very great director.

But who else? I also had others who didn't work out so well.

Pfaff: Well, another example is Simmons.

Adler: Oh, Calvin Simmons.

Pfaff: Yes. He was very young.

Adler: Well, Calvin I had known since he was ten years old. But again, I think his big success was the Lady Macbeth. He had conducted other things which were good, but not this incredible success that he had with Lady Macbeth.

I think that had also to do with the state of the development of Calvin as a person and as a musician. And that is only possible if you lived, like I did, with Calvin for so many years in the same city and watched him grow in the company. But you may not put him in charge of the right work, perhaps.

Pfaff: So how was it that you knew Levine well enough to hire him in the first place?

Adler: Well, I think he had done Tosca somewhere before, with great success. But he had also done Butterfly. So you never know. It's a big gamble.

The 1970 Rake's Progress

Pfaff: Another production I would like to talk about from the 1970 season was The Rake's Progress. It was one of the more notable examples of your bringing a modern work back that you weren't sure was going to work with the audience.

Adler: The Rake's Progress--the Met did it before San Francisco, and it wasn't very successful at the Met. I think that the passing of years helped there, and not only The Rake's Progress, but Stravinsky had become more accepted by the public, and contemporary opera was also more accepted.

The Rake was a production which Paul Hager did quite well. It was not a very expensive production, yet it was a production which had great merit artistically.

Pfaff: Was it notably a greater success the second time around?

Adler: I think so. Neither did it find the resistance that it obviously had at first hearing--less in San Francisco than at the Metropolitan--but, as I said, the public trusted me by then. I mean, I had been in charge for seventeen years. They had had to swallow a lot by then. And it worked.

Who sang Tom Rakewell in that production?

Pfaff: In the 1970 one?

Adler: It was first Richard Lewis, I remember, who was very, very good.

Pfaff: Yes. In 1970 it was [Gregory] Dempsey.

Adler: Yes. Well, he did not have the stature of Richard Lewis. I must say he was a good artist, but Richard was a very special artist. I think he did very well. Who was Anne Truelove?

Pfaff: It was Marsh, Jane Marsh.

Adler: Oh, Marsh? Well, retrospectively, I think that was not a great idea of mine.

Pfaff: But you had Gunther Schuller in the pit.

Adler: Yes. Well, I'll tell you--Gunther did some good things for us, but he was not a special conductor for opera. He did here, if I am not mistaken, Ariadne, he did Rake's Progress--what else did he do? Of course, his own Visitation as part of the Triple Bill, as we discussed.

Pfaff: How did those come up?

Adler: The Weill was suggested to me by Schuller, actually. The others I came up with, but that was too much. But sometimes you have the feeling maybe you don't do enough, especially if you have difficult things like Christopher Columbus and Erwartung. You think you had better do something else to start with. But it was wrong. Two were enough.

What did we do together with La Voix Humaine in 1979?
Prigioniero, Voix Humaine, and Schicchi?

Pfaff: Yes, Gianni Schicchi. That was also a long night in the theater, but it was an engrossing one.

Adler: Well, you know the interesting thing is that Puccini's triptych, all of us consider too long. When we produce it we say it belongs together because it's like a symphony of three movements. But it is too long, there is no doubt. Then when you do two only, something is missing.

I've done Tabarro and Schicchi and also Suor Angelica and Schicchi has been done. But it doesn't work. It's very difficult to decide what's right and what's wrong.

Midsummer Night's Dream--The English Opera Group: 1971

Pfaff: Well, before we stop I want to pursue something in the 1971 season, which was, it looks to me, an unusual arrangement with the English Opera Group bringing Midsummer Night's Dream here complete. How did that come about?

Adler: Well, it came about that the British Consul General here had some celebration, a trade exhibition for British Week. And he told me that--what was the company called?

Pfaff: The English Opera Group.

Adler: The English Opera Group would be traveling, and what could one do with them? Well, the Midsummer Night's Dream was rather successful here when we had done it with Geraint Evans and Mary Costa and so on, so they did that, and it was a nice performance. I thought to bring it back was nice, and that's what they wanted to travel with, anyhow, so it occurred. We had some help from them, so financially it wasn't a risk, and that's what we did. They sent Princess Alexandra, who is a charming lady.

I'm not sure if I didn't prefer our production to the English Opera Group's production. Geraint [Evans] was overwhelming in his role, and Mary [Costa] was also utterly charming. I came to think it was not necessarily a step ahead, although it was a step ahead in that San Francisco Opera had never sponsored a guest appearance by a company before.

Pfaff: During the season yet! That's what I was wondering--how did that work? How did these people fit into what was a very busy repertory season already?

Adler: Well, it made it easier.

Pfaff: It did?

Adler: Because we used our orchestra, not a large orchestra, and it gave a rest to the chorus.

Pfaff: And it wasn't a sort of interference with the rest of what was going on?

Adler: No. Why?

Pfaff: Well, I was just thinking if it was sort of a pre-fab show, I mean, something that was traveling and had been done elsewhere, it would seem to be something that you would have less control over.

Adler: Well, excuse me, that is entirely correct. But I think if you bring an entire company, it is an entity, and it is not up to you to modify artistic standards. They bring it and they do it, and it is not your product.

Pfaff: And it saves you rehearsal time, I suppose.

Adler: Sure.

XIII 1972, 1973 AND 1974

[Interview 13: May 15, 1985] ##

The 1972 Season

The Visit of the Old Lady

Adler: [Gottfried] von Einem's Visit of the Old Lady is based on a [Friedrich] Dürrenmatt play that I knew, which is an excellent play. The opera was done in Vienna. Also he wrote earlier operas which were quite good, among them The Trial, based on Kafka, and Dantons Tod.

I decided to try it. I made an experiment. First I asked [Francis Ford] Coppola if he would direct it, with Bob Darling as designer, which perhaps was not an ideal artistic marriage. I think they got along very well, but I am not sure that they are really two artistic talents and temperaments which match.

And then came the main problem. I wanted very badly to give Regina Resnik an opportunity for another big success, because I thought very highly of her. So I sent her to von Einem and let her work with him early enough that if he would say "no, that wouldn't be the right thing," that we could try to find someone else. But he advised me that he was very happy with Regina. Well, I'm sorry; when she sang it here, it was really beyond her vocal means of the period. I think that the success of the performance was handicapped by the difficulties she had with the role vocally.

But obviously von Einem is a contemporary composer to reckon with. Perhaps, perhaps--I don't say that it really was so, but perhaps my having been born in Vienna as an Austrian, and von Einem being an Austrian contemporary composer, influenced me also to do this work.

Pfaff: Had you heard it in the Vienna production with Ludwig?

Adler: No, afterwards.

Pfaff: Oh, you did?

Adler: Yes. Well, maybe it was before; you know, I'm not quite sure. I think the production idea which Coppola had was quite good. But the whole thing was not wonderful, unfortunately.

A New Tosca by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle

Adler: Then the other one we're talking about here is Tosca, the new production of Tosca. [Jean-Pierre] Ponnelle is at all times a very special designer and producer. He did several things in Tosca I wasn't very happy with, and I told him so. But at that time I was unable to talk him out of it. Later on, I think, he listened more to me than he did in that period. For instance, the idea to have, in the first act the altar in the church, to show the back of the altar--I think it's a very, very intelligent idea. It solves a lot of problems of this first act with what you have to direct--the painting, Angelotti scenes, the procession and so on. I think that this is very, very interesting.

At the same time, the altar was possibly a little tall for showing its behind to the audience all the time. And on top of it, in a typical rascal mood, Ponnelle decided that in the back the lace cloth which was lying on the altar should be torn; the lace had to be torn. And obviously someone had used a broom, and put all kinds of old papers and leaves and what behind the altar. I said to Jean-Pierre, "Why does one have to perform this music in dirt and dust?" Well, he was in one of his moods and I didn't succeed.

On the other hand, I think the killing of Scarpia in the second act is very interesting.

Pfaff: For the eventual readers of this, explain what the difference is.

Adler: Well, it isn't a normal knife--it is a special knife for shellfish. It is difficult for me to describe the whole scene now because it has been so long since Ponnelle rehearsed it.

In the meantime other directors directed his Tosca here, and it was never quite the same. But it worked well. He is such a man of the stage and so musical that his timing was always something very special.

Pfaff: Isn't the essential difference between that Tosca and the more conventional Tosca that Scarpia was killed at his desk rather than out more in the open, and he is slumped over his desk rather than lying on the floor?

Adler: Was he killed at his desk? I have seen so many Toscas since that I don't remember the Tosca of Ponnelle entirely.

Pfaff: It was a large table; I can't remember if it was a desk or if it was a table.

Adler: Right, on stage left, I think so. He eats on his working table. The production had another problem, again [generated by] a wonderful idea. The Tosca, when she leaves the scene of the killing, goes out not only one door, but several doors, like going through a deep hall. Finally she faces an enormous painting of Scarpia, a portrait of the man she had just killed, again a wonderful idea, only it didn't work because too few people in the audience actually saw it. But the idea was great.

The same for her entrance: it was a grandiose entrance when she comes out after singing the cantata in the second act, and comes through all those doors, you know--fabulous.

L'Africaine and a Bomb Threat

Adler: The other thing that we did that year was L'Africaine. I grew up with Meyerbeer in Vienna, and in those days the Vienna Opera performed L'Africaine. It performed Les Huguenots, Le Prophète, and this kind of old-fashioned grand opera was very popular. L'Africaine was successful here with [Placido] Domingo and [Shirley] Verrett. I think we had to bring in [Norman] Mittelmann.

Pfaff: It became Mittelmann.

Adler: Yes, it was someone else first, I've forgotten who. During the first act I was called from my box and I was told that a rather large group of policemen had arrived backstage. It was a bomb threat, and we were told that there might be a bomb in the proscenium. The commanding officer really thought that it might be desirable to stop the performance. I told him that we had just a few minutes left until the end of the first act and he said, "Oh, well, that should be all right." So we finished the first act. It was a production that could have continued practically immediately.

But we made the break there, and I went, not in front of the curtain--if I remember, there was no curtain--but I went on the stage. And I told the people that we had a technical problem which we had to resolve before we continued the performance, and would they please leave the auditorium.

But anyhow, it was done with a joke and whatnot, except that I didn't feel very happy because at the moment I went on the stage, I asked, "Where is this bomb supposedly placed?" And they said, "In the proscenium." I said, "When is it to go off?" They said, "At nine o'clock." It was two minutes to nine and obviously I stood right below the site in the proscenium. Of course, it was nothing, but we had a fairly long break between the first and the second acts, which was not helpful. But Placido was very, very good in the role of Vasco de Gama.

The Ring

Adler: Norma, of course, is also a real grand opera, which with [Joan] Sutherland was an apropos thing to do, since it had not been here in a long time.

Pfaff: Thirty-five years, amazingly.

Adler: We didn't have much luck later on with it when she didn't sing it, and I had to replace [Caballe] with several singers. We didn't do so well at that time, but it was repertoire that I think was appropriate. I was glad that we could do the Ring, the entire Ring. Was this the year that we did the Ring?

Pfaff: Yes, it was, in '72.

Adler: But with a large orchestra?

Pfaff: No, that wasn't until '76.

Adler: I know. That year we did the Ring still in the condensed orchestration, because the pit at the opera house was too small. Nobody would go along with me because we would lose two rows on the main floor and a lot of money from tickets. Well, I succeeded with it later and I am delighted that they are playing now in the opera house in an enlarged pit. It's certainly easier for the strings to bow, [and there can be] no excuse that there's no space for bowing. The string tone must be at its best.

Pfaff: What would you estimate the success was of doing the Ring right in the middle of the fall season? That's something that your successor has said he would never try; he needed to have it all by itself with no competition.

Adler: Well, first of all, we had performed the individual operas. It wasn't a new production--we improved a thing here and a thing there, but it wasn't a new production so the technical rehearsals had not to be as extensive as they have to be when you have a new production. I agree that it is better not to do the Ring within a season, but in 1970 there was no possibility yet to think of a summer season.

Pfaff: So that was really the only opportunity you had.

Adler: Yes.

Pfaff: One of the things that still was in effect at that time, in '72, before '76 when you did Walküre in the big pit, was cuts. What was your feeling at the time that there still needed to be cuts in the Ring?

Adler: Look, the cuts--there will never be a real answer to cuts, yes or no, because, as you know, many composers indicated some cuts themselves. I'm sure if one looks closely enough, Wagner did this too. The question arises, is it better to cut and make a success, or risk to bore part of the audience, because let's face it--if people don't know the Ring, some of them will find it's too long, because it is long. Also, with an orchestra that plays an entire season, for instance, to do an uncut Ring is also very taxing. Actually in the condensed version the players have still to play more than in the original version, because you take the missing woodwinds and the missing horns and trumpets and whatnot, and naturally the others, those who play, have to play more because they have to play some of the music of the missing instruments.

So there are all kinds of reasons. I must admit that I cannot say that one shouldn't cut a note. Sometimes, with this playing everything, there's a feeling, "My God, he must even have added notes," meaning the conductor.

Did I tell you the story of when I conducted the Fourth Bruckner in Chicago?

Pfaff: Yes.

Adler: There you have the story. The same is naturally true in opera, perhaps even more so. But I have seen to it that later on in the Ring there were no cuts, if I remember right, the last time. In

Meistersinger I made minimum cuts when I conducted. There are passages in some cases where it is not wrong to do a cut, because the music is not helpful, the timing may be wrong. I do not belong to those who say, "You must not cut."

Pfaff: I had an opportunity to speak with Ruth Felt earlier in the week, and one of the things that she told me was that it was her impression that the '72 Ring was absolutely instrumental in your dealing with the board after Mr. Miller, inasmuch as the board was nervous about doing more than three complete Rings. And you had wanted to do more but went along with the board's wish, and of course it wasn't enough. Do you remember how that worked out?

Adler: No. We did three?

Pfaff: Three.

Adler: It probably wasn't the easiest to satisfy the normal subscription systems. You had certain subscriptions, and we always tried to be fair to them. Either there were some subscriptions which had all the operas, or there was a certain balance of the repertoire. This may also be a part of an answer to your question of [doing] the Ring in a normal season. I don't think we had a special subscription for the Ring only; I don't think so.

Pfaff: No, I don't believe so either.

Adler: Was this the Ring where Professor Schaeffer gave introductions?

Pfaff: Not that I'm aware of.

Adler: Well, either in '76 or '72--it probably was '76--my friend, Professor Schaeffer, who was Intendant of the opera in Stuttgart, was here and gave some very interesting lectures, introducing those who didn't know the Ring. He was to some degree influenced by Wieland Wagner, who was a great friend of his and directed a great deal in Stuttgart at the Stuttgart Opera.

Now our Ring scenically was a Wieland Wagner Ring without Wieland. Paul Hager, who was the director--and I think the designer was Wolfram Skalicki--they were under the influence of Wieland Wagner, there's no doubt. Hager had worked in Bayreuth, studying and assisting, and Skalicki had been in Bayreuth frequently. So it is quite understandable, and I don't think it was a bad production at all. It was a cheap production, and the taste of audiences [had] developed against cheap productions. Consequently they were less willing to accept cheaper productions, although I don't think that they were really so spoiled that only luxurious productions were considered to be good.

Who was the cast in that Ring, do you know?

Pfaff: Yes. Well, you had [Birgit] Nilsson for at least one complete Brunnhilde.

Adler: In '72?

Pfaff: Yes.

Adler: Well then, I think she sang at least four performances if I am not mistaken, and probably sang the last Götterdämmerung, the last Götterdämmerung and the last Ring. Before that Berit Lindholm sang it. She is a soprano of whom I think very highly. Very different from Birgit Nilsson, but I liked her work very, very much. She went over very well.

It's interesting, however--when Birgit Nilsson came, Lindholm sang Sieglinde, and that didn't work so well. I think it had not only to do with being in the same performance with Birgit, but that [the role of] Sieglinde lies very low. At that time Lindholm was best in the high range. But she is a soprano I remember with great pleasure.

I was supposed to conduct somewhere a couple of years ago, and had to cancel. That was with Lindholm. I think it was Tristan with Lindholm, actually. She cancelled too, then.

Pfaff: Before she took over Sieglinde, you had another real find in Marita Napier, who made a big sensation during that Ring.

Adler: Marita Napier, the South African soprano. She had a voice with great appeal, and also a lot of expression. I think better than Sieglinde was her Senta; her Senta was outstanding.

When I put a repertoire together, I tried to have a considerable variety of styles, of weight, serious, comic, and so on. When you have only ten or twelve operas on the repertoire every year as we did in those days, there were people who complained and said, "Why don't we hear this?" I had to tell them, "I'm sorry you don't get it this year, but please wait several years. You must understand, when we have only ten or twelve operas which we can produce every season, we cannot do everything every year." So the mixture of style and weight was one thing. You have to watch the box office, because you must schedule and select a repertoire in a way that you may expect a drop in attendance for one reason or the other, and you still carry those operas along. If you have them in subscription, the worst can be that they don't

come. The fancy people sometimes send their butlers who are heartily bored! They behave very well, however.

There are so many considerations. I don't think you should schedule operas when you cannot cast. In some places where there are festivals that do special operas, let's say Wagner--if they don't have a cast, they are forced to give Wagner nevertheless. You sometimes hear casts and don't understand why on earth do they sing here? But when you have the liberty to schedule the repertoire, you will schedule operas you think you can cast. Singers would have cancelled more on me also by now, but I didn't have as many cancellations [in those days]. In many cases they were personal friends and they looked forward to coming to San Francisco. So we didn't have as many cancellations, actually, as there are now, not only in San Francisco, but everywhere.

Lucia di Lammermoor and Designer Carl Toms

Pfaff: Well, one of the things about the 1972 season was you certainly had singers! One of the productions that we haven't talked about yet--besides having Sutherland opening the season [in Norma], you had Sills almost closing it in a new Lucia. It was a Carl Toms production.

Adler: When Joan Sutherland sang Lucia here first I was dealing with Zeffirelli. But he couldn't make it. This 1961 Lucia was, if I'm not mistaken, designed by Leni Bauer-Ecsy, and I mention this name with affection and gratitude. She did many productions in San Francisco which were very good and very beautiful, but I don't think that the Lucia was the best thing that we had. Am I right that it was Leni who designed it?

Pfaff: Yes.

Adler: I remember not being too happy with that Lucia production for Sutherland. An opera of the standards of the San Francisco Opera has to have scenery for the repertoire that they own. I did not feel that one really could share standard repertoire. When I talked about Aida the other day, that we were sharing Aida with the Met, it was much later [when] there were financial necessities. In addition it was also my moral obligation as I saw it to help a colleague at the Metropolitan to get a new Aida, which they needed as badly as we did. But who knew before this Aida was created that after we had this new Aida, we would need another new Aida right away again, too?

But I didn't feel happy with not owning standard operas. I very reluctantly brought the Bohème of Ponnelle from--where was it? From Strasbourg, I think. But everybody was raving, and I think rightly, about this Bohème, and yet it was not the style of production that I felt San Francisco would necessarily want to own. So we brought it over once. But again, standard repertoire should really have a different production in each theater.

Pfaff: Had you worked with Carl Toms before, or was that the first Toms production? I remember there were a few others.

Adler: I don't remember what the first was.¹ I know that he did Thaïs [1976]. I have a very funny memory about this. Did we talk about this one episode?

Pfaff: No.

Adler: I was in London and that was a time when they had many bomb scares and other bomb attacks in London. So they had very strict security in the hotel I was staying in. People were stopped immediately when they came through the revolving door and were searched. Well, Carl Toms naively came with an enormous box, and in the box were the models for Thaïs. The security man had never seen such a thing in his life. So poor Carl Toms had to take out every little piece in this enormous box he came with, and was completely shattered when he came up to me to the room finally to show me the production. Of course I said afterwards to him, "You see, this production would have been over-designed," which was less Carl Toms's fault than [Tito] Capobianco's, who wanted everything on earth in Thaïs, production-wise.

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Adler: I liked to work with Toms. I remember with great joy the sessions we had when we discussed the productions. He came with ideas and I came with questions, and maybe sometimes with ideas and so on. Anyway, he was a very nice man to work with.

Pfaff: It was one of the productions that was funded by Cyril Magnin; he did several. How did that association begin?

Adler: I don't know, but I would proudly consider Cyril as a very close friend, a generous friend, and if you are in trouble or if he wants to see something that he likes, he will help you do it.

¹The 1972 Lucia de Lammermoor was Toms's first production for San Francisco Opera.

I remember one occasion when we were bringing scenery for, I think it was Il Tabarro, from Europe [1971], and there was a strike. The scenery came by boat and was stuck somehow--it was a maritime strike, you know? The crew struck and they couldn't unload boats here, so the boat was detained in a Mexican port. What is it? Well, it's a Mexican port not too far south from the border. And there was no way to get this boat unloaded when it would dock here. So Cyril offered a new production. Of course, these productions, especially of one-act operas, didn't cost as much as now. But I got a new Tabarro from it because of the maritime strike.

[What] were you talking about--did he give us the Thaïs production?

Pfaff: Well, I can check that. I imagine that he might have.²

Adler: It's very possible, because Cyril was a very, very close friend of Beverly Sills.

Pfaff: We were talking about Carl Toms, and the Lucia.

Adler: I didn't remember that he did Lucia.

Pfaff: It's credited to him.

Adler: Toms's Lucia?

Pfaff: Yes. Which was the first time with Sills, in '72, Sills and Pavarotti.

Adler: Was that the year that Pavarotti got so hoarse during the performance?

Pfaff: I don't know.

Adler: There was one incident when Pavarotti didn't feel well, and he got feeling that his voice was not there in the act before the last. As you remember, the last act is mainly a solo scene for the tenor. But Pavarotti said to me, no, he would not stop the performance and I went in front of the curtain, which I could have fought because I didn't do it too often. So when I did it the public, I think, realized that it definitely was a necessity to announce this situation. Heroically Luciano went through this last act, for which I and everybody in the audience was grateful.

²Magnin was the sponsor.

The Marriage of Figaro

Pfaff: One of the very important things that we have to mention in the 1972 season was the debut of Kiri Te Kanawa in Le Nozze di Figaro. I'll personally never forget that production. You had an all-star cast.

Adler: Yes, although I would rather call it an all-artist cast than an all-star cast, because when the artist becomes a star in The Marriage of Figaro, Figaro gets lost, because it is so much an ensemble opera.

Pfaff: Which it was in this case.

Adler: Kiri I knew from London quite well. It took a while to get her here. But it was very interesting--she was a princess, really, through the entire role at that time.

Pfaff: What do you mean by that?

Adler: Well, she had an extremely aristocratic attitude on the stage; almost cool. But her voice was very fresh and lovely. I think that she certainly belongs among the best Countesses I have heard in my life, and I have heard many good ones, not to forget [Elisabeth] Schwarzkopf or Lotte Lehmann.

I remember with pleasure having conducted Figaro with [Schwarzkopf] several times. I remember in one performance of Figaro in San Diego, when the lights in the pit went out in the second act. Schwarzkopf noticed it, and she was trying to get the attention, during the finale of the second act, of the people in the wings, telling them all the time that the lights in the pit were out. But it was so brightly lit in the second act that the orchestra finished without major problems, without pit lights. But Elisabeth tried desperately to get the attention of the people in the wings.

Pfaff: How could she do that from the stage?

Adler: Oh, she could do such things--she worked her way close to the wings and turned around. I noticed and heard, of course, being close, what she was telling them.

The 1973 Season

The Ponnelle Rigoletto

Pfaff: In 1973, the following year, you had what was nearly the most controversial of the Ponnelle productions. It was yet to be upstaged by The Flying Dutchman, but it was the Rigoletto. We've talked about it a little bit. Its sponsor was James D. Robertson; it was one of the first that he was responsible for. Who was he and what was the connection?

Adler: Jim Robertson was a treasurer of the company and he was an opera enthusiast. He loved opera. And the San Francisco Opera and I owe him a lot for his generosity helping with productions. The Rigoletto was a very interesting idea of Ponnelle's. I don't know if we talked about this, that he wanted originally--

Pfaff: The lake.

Adler: The lake, yes, that he used in the film. He really played a lot in the water; he had a boat in the water. I think that Rigoletto has a lot to offer. I was quite interested when I conducted it last fall. I saw the production and felt the production, naturally, again, from a different angle and viewpoint. When I saw the plans and watched it being built, and saw the rehearsals and so on, [I thought] it held up.

In the film I noticed that Ponnelle was retaining the idea of the cage, for instance, for Gilda, which others have done too. Roman Polanski goes too far in this. At the Munich Opera there is a Rigoletto production where it is really a mini-nest, even smaller than the Gilda house here.

The Ponnelle production is not necessarily what I like, but at the same time, it is a production thought through by a musician and artist, a painter, and a man with the strongest romantic feeling.

I know the Zeffirelli Rigoletto also quite well, which perhaps is simpler and therefore easier to take, although it is again over-designed and over-staged. But I can imagine that here it wasn't easy for the people to swallow what they saw on the stage.

Pfaff: I think I caught three or four performances of Rigoletto that season, and one of the things I did notice was that the actual staging of the very first scene at the Duke's ball was changed. The ladies who appeared in very little in the first performance had

slightly more to wear for the next performance. Do you remember how that came about? I mean, there was a strong audience reaction to the near-nudity.

Adler: No, I don't remember. I tell you why I get everything mixed up--we did a wild Rigoletto in the Spring Opera. The director was [Gilbert] Moses. That certainly surpassed in daring what Ponnelle wanted to do.

Pfaff: Yes, I think the Spring Opera production was a couple of years earlier than the Ponnelle in '73.

Adler: Maurice Peress conducted The Old Lady in '72? Are you sure?

Pfaff: Well, that's according to Bloomfield.

Adler: Well, that he must have right.

Pfaff: What he doesn't talk about in his text and doesn't, of course, give in the back was the name of the designer, which you supplied.

Adler: And Lopez-Cobos conducted the Tosca?

Pfaff: No, the Lucia.

Adler: Oh, Lucia, yes, yes.

Pfaff: It was Sanzogno for the Tosca.

Adler: We had so many Toscas here that at times it really becomes possible to forget who conducted what. I remember Leinsdorf conducting Tosca once in earlier days. I remember the singers--for many years Dorothy Kirsten sang Tosca here, most Toscas. [Renata] Tebaldi did Tosca, which was incidentally conducted by Glauco Curiel. But I get a little mixed up.

La Favorita

Pfaff: One of the things I wasn't clear about was the Gramma Fisher La Favorita of 1973. With whom was that shared? Didn't you say that the Gramma Fisher things always were shared with another house?

Adler: They had to be shared.

Pfaff: With whom was that one shared?

Adler: The Metropolitan, I think. That was an unfortunate thing. Marilyn Horne was supposed to star in La Favorita for the opening in 1973. Then she cancelled.

Pfaff: Well, it was one of your stellar replacements, having Christa Ludwig replacing her.

Adler: Did Christa sing all performances?

Pfaff: She didn't sing any; she had an illness.

Adler: Oh, yes. Who was the girl who sang it?

Pfaff: It was Maria Luisa Nave and Gwendolyn Killibrew.

Adler: Both made a pretty good career afterwards. Nave more in Italian opera and Killibrew is quite popular in Germany and France. But I was very unhappy. I cannot say that La Favorita is one of my favorite operas, and having decided to do it for Horne and Pavarotti, I was very sorry that all the problems arose.

Peter Grimes

Adler: [Looking through repertoire] We talked about the Ring. Is this the first Peter Grimes we did in '73?

Pfaff: Yes, it was the first time in the company. Was that planned for [Jon] Vickers?

Adler: Yes. I think very highly of Peter Grimes as an opera drama. The stories that are told about the ushers at the Metropolitan who said they had to hold the doors to keep the people in the auditorium for the performances and so on--that was not the case in San Francisco at all. I have done a lot of [Benjamin] Britten works, actually, in the various companies.

Pfaff: Yes, and you actually did some Britten in the big house before Peter Grimes, which is unusual.

Adler: Yes, true. Peter Grimes, I think, is a very strong work, and I'm glad we did it. Of course, Vickers was outstanding as Peter, and then later, Jess Thomas did it.

Pfaff: Actually it was the other way around. Jess Thomas did it in '73 and Vickers came and did it in '76.

Adler: Really?

Pfaff: Yes. Vickers was absolutely stunning in '76. In '73 it had been planned for Vickers, I understand, and then Jess Thomas came in.

Adler: I had forgotten that. But Jess, whom I adore, is a great artist, and that is a role where it takes some time to really get hold of it. Those days I am afraid we may not have given him enough time for rehearsal and so on. Peter Grimes is an intricate role. Jess is an excellent musician so musically it was no problem for him, but psychologically and dramatically, to work it out--I don't know how much opera in English he really had sung at that time, but he certainly did a very, very quick job of it, and I'm glad he did it. Did Vickers cancel that time, or what happened?

Pfaff: Well, I gather he did. Bloomfield isn't clear on the subject, but it was only a couple of years after the cancellation of Tristan in '70. And he didn't come back again until '76 when he did both the Siegmund and Peter Grimes in the same season. Did you say that you had planned it at one point for Vickers and Britten?

Adler: I said so, because I like Britten, I admire Britten, and I think he is a composer who should be played again and again.

Pfaff: He was still alive then; did you plan for him to come?

Adler: No.

Pfaff: It was my understanding that Britten actually didn't approve of Jon Vickers's playing of the role.

Adler: Really?

Pfaff: Yes. Well, it's so very different from the much more aristocratic Peter Pears performance.

Adler: I haven't seen Pears; I don't know. Did he sing it at Covent Garden?

Pfaff: Yes, he did; the first performance was at Covent Garden.

Adler: Certainly the voice of Pears is a much smaller voice than Vickers's voice was. You know, I conducted the last scene in concert once, with the Los Angeles Master Chorale; mainly the chorus parts. And I must say, it was for me an emotional event. I have never conducted the entire opera, but I bow to Mr. Britten for this opera, for his operas; make it plural.

Leonie Rysanek's Return in Tannhäuser

Pfaff: Before we get to your conducting, I want to just ask you a few things about the [Leonie] Rysanek return. It was a very celebrated return when she came back as Elisabeth in Tannhäuser in 1973. Do you recall reasons why she was absent from the stage for periods?

Adler: No. I really don't remember why. She certainly, in the beginning, when she was here in America, had a lot of success. But she had some changes in her personal life and it may be that this had something to do with it. You remember the year [Maria] Callas cancelled, how much she helped.

Pfaff: Three roles, I think. [Lady Macbeth, Aida, and Amelia]

Adler: And one she had to learn. Rysanek is a very quick learner and musician, of course. If I'm not mistaken, she sang an Italian opera in German here, also.

Pfaff: Un Ballo in Maschera. But she learned Lady Macbeth in a day.

Adler: That's right, in a day. She's really a great personality on the stage, which showed already then and is incredible now. I recall in Tannhäuser, after the prelude to the second act comes the aria, and the curtain didn't go up. She stood there, and the curtain was closed.

Pfaff: This was during the regular fall season?

Adler: Yes, and it happened again in San Diego. The machinery of the curtain at the War Memorial Opera House was not in very good shape, but it took quite a while before there was enough money available to the War Memorial Board to replace the curtain and the machinery.

Pfaff: What kind of machinery was it? Was it essentially a pulley apparatus that got the curtain up?

Adler: Yes, of course, but it wasn't a very good thing. For instance, one couldn't change the speed while the curtain was moving, which is very important for dramatic reasons. Sometimes in a big house where the curtain has to travel quite a bit, you want to have the curtain start slower and then finish fast, and this was not the case. I think it is now. But it was an old-fashioned deal, because after all, it was installed in the early thirties.

Pfaff: When I spoke with Rysanek in New York, she said that one of the reasons she was gone for a few seasons was that singers had to be

engaged more years in advance in the early seventies, and she said there were a number of years when the timing just didn't work out. The two of you had been talking about her coming back in town for a number of years before it could actually be worked out. Is that consistent with your memory?

Adler: Let's say it rings a bell, but I wouldn't say it is consistent with my memory. But you see she wanted Tannhäuser--Elisabeth was the right opera for her after she was absent, and I couldn't do Tannhäuser very easily. Nobody can, perhaps, and I am sorry to say we never had a very satisfactory Tannhäuser production. At that time, we still used the old production, I think. We had another production which I wasn't too happy with, but that was all I could do at that time. I think it was a Skalicki production.

The Venusberg is something which is very hard to solve, then it's a question of the two versions, if you do the original Dresden version or if you do the Paris version. If you do the Paris version it is more effective, but then stylistically there are discrepancies. The Paris version, which already reminds you of Parsifal and Tristan, doesn't go with many of the parts that are alike in both versions. So Tannhäuser is a very, very difficult opera to present.

La Traviata: Adler and Conducting

Pfaff: One of the signal things about the '73 season was that you made your reappearance in the pit as a conductor for [La] Traviata. I'm wondering why it was in '73, and why was it that you hadn't conducted since '61?

Adler: Well, during the growth of the opera, and my learning more and more about what I thought were the general director's duties, there was really no time to concentrate on conducting. Also, Robert Watt Miller was president at that time, and he suggested to me that it might be an idea to wait a few years until I really had brought up the company to the standards I wanted. He came to a lot of rehearsals, and he saw how I was involved in every little bit--whether the chorus had stockings on that were too light or too dark; I noticed it and talked about it. He liked that, and he thought, well, if I would conduct, I might not be so willing to sit in every rehearsal and really interfere--interfere meaning in a positive way.

For me this was a personal problem, because I was brought up to be a musician. Then came the chorus business, and I must say

that I was seemingly very talented as a chorus director, because choruses, wherever I touched them, went well.

I had an experience in Sydney where I conducted Fidelio last fall: representatives of the chorus came to me and told me that the chorus wanted me to know that they liked so much to work with me and to sing with me, and that they were very unhappy that they didn't have more rehearsals with me, because they were so interested. The chorus here in the forties became really a very good chorus; I must tell you this with pride.

But the discovery that I was good in administrative things happened, I regret to say, in 1928 in my first year in opera, in Germany, and ever since, wherever I was, I tended naturally to get involved in administrative activities, and in artistic activities, involved in all details of all productions, besides the personnel problems, which are unavoidable in opera. Then it [becomes] a question whether one can do all of that and conduct on top of it, or not.

Pfaff: What were the conflicts for you?

Adler: Well, the conflict was that I wanted to be a conductor. And all my life, I was somehow involved in other things.

Pfaff: Well, how was it that you finally were able to put together enough time to prepare scores and to do that sort of thing and do all that you were doing? You didn't stop doing the rest of your duties!

Adler: No, I didn't. But '73 was twenty years after I took over. Of course, there are certain things which go automatically if you are in charge for such a long time. And I didn't conduct operas which required very much study. It's not the time or study, but the total dedication of your mind and your musicianship and your feeling and whatnot, that you must give and put into your conducting when you really want to do a strong job.

Pfaff: I remember that one of the things about that Traviata was that you went through a number of Germonts in the course of the production. I think it was the next year when you were conducting Butterfly--

Adler: That was seven tenors, I believe. It was really the most difficult thing, one change after the other. Once we changed in the course of performance; we had one tenor in the first act and another one in the third act, if I am not mistaken.

Pfaff: I think that's right.

Adler: But those things are tough luck. You cannot avoid them.

[reading] What does it say here? "In response to the Leinsdorf"-- What is this?

Pfaff: Yes, I was surprised to read this. This is in Bloomfield. It was about your return to the pit. I wasn't aware of this book even.

Adler: As I told you, I haven't read the book.

Pfaff: This is from Bloomfield: "In his autobiography Cadenza, conductor Erich Leinsdorf, who appeared a lot with the San Francisco Opera in his early days, says that Robert Watt Miller refused Adler the post of general director after Merola's death in 1953 unless he promised not to double as conductor. Miller, says Leinsdorf, who neglects to notice that the opera president must have been familiar with Adler's conducting, had been appalled by the clockwise-counterclockwise exhibitions of Merola, and, expecting nothing better from his successor, insisted on a period of abstention." But Bloomfield says that this doesn't explain how, when Miller was there, you conducted in '58, '60, and '61.

Adler: Sure. And also, if this is true, then Mr. Leinsdorf knows something that I don't know and that to the best of my knowledge, is not true. Because there were no conditions attached when I took over in '53 after Merola died--none. And it was at Mr. Miller's request that I became the assistant of Merola in the late forties when he was ailing and was still running the company. I know that Mr. Miller had a fixed idea about Merola's conducting. He didn't like Merola to conduct.

Now Merola had special things which he did extremely well; I must say that the Bohème of Merola was something unique. That's why I, for many years, didn't touch Bohème, because Merola did it so well. I finally got over it and did some Bohèmes. But that was great. He had other operas which perhaps were less good. But Mr. Miller had a fixed idea with Merola. I don't know what happened before I came here--maybe I don't know even what happened after I came here--but I seem to remember that there was some story that some artists had complained about Merola, didn't want to sing with him. Now I have never heard this.

I also would have heard if some artists might not have wanted to sing with me; I didn't hear this. I know that some people like Leontyne Price, for instance, sang her first Butterfly with me and was very happy, although I would do a Butterfly now completely differently from the way I did it then. Or she sang Forza with me very frequently, repeatedly. When she sang [La] Forza [del Destino] the last time with me, we suddenly had an incredible contact during the "Pace, pace" and changed her interpretation and

phrasing during the performance. But talking about Butterfly--I did Butterfly with [Renata] Scotto, who certainly was not an easy person, and she was very, very happy with the way I did it.

Mr. Leinsdorf has also made other remarks in his first book about me, which I don't want to go into. I would only like to say that a man who invites you for dinner--and I went for dinner to his apartment in Lausanne from Geneva and in New York, when we went to their Fifth Avenue apartment and went to a Solti concert in Carnegie Hall with them and whatnot--that I hadn't read this book and was completely amazed, then, to read these very unfriendly remarks which had nothing to do with artistic things. He criticized me as a man.

The 1974 Season

Pfaff: When we go on to the '74 season, one of the things that stands out is that all of the new productions were completely private gifts; they weren't from foundations, they were from individuals. Your fund-raising was obviously working extremely well.

Adler: Well, we talked about Jim Robertson, who was a very dedicated man, dedicated to San Francisco Opera and also to me. And Esclarmonde was, of course, from Mrs. Rudolph Light, who is Gordon Getty's mother, if that says anything, and who was very generous. She liked the glamour of sponsoring a grand opera of Massenet which had not been done, and which Sutherland was doing for the first time. She was very insulted that it didn't go immediately to the Met. Naturally, it went to the Met later on.

Pfaff: It had a very big success, as big a success as it had here, I think.

Tristan and Isolde

Adler: Yes, I think so. Then there was Dan Koshland, who was again a friend of the opera and a friend of mine, and a lover of Wagner, so we did a new Tristan [und Isolde] in 1974. I had seen a Parsifal directed by Dietrich Haugk in Munich, and had met the man--a very interesting and intelligent man. He came with the idea of using Mr. Roman Weyl, whom I didn't know and who lived in West Berlin, as designer, and I'm not sure that it really was the best solution at that time.

There are many solutions for Tristan. I saw last the Ponnelle Tristan in Bayreuth, and I said to him after seeing it that I think if I would have participated in this production, meaning that if he would have done it for me, or if I would have been with him in rehearsals, that there were things that would have been different. His answer was, with this charming grin, "Very likely."

In that Tristan, which, incidentally, I conducted, Gwyneth Jones sang her first Isolde. She was supposed to come early, and she was sick, so not only did she come late, but she came not very well prepared for a role as important and as long as Isolde.

Mr. Haugk was a very sensitive director, but he was hampered as I was by the mutual effort to really get Gwyneth into this role. It took a couple of performances here, actually, to get her into it. She was much better when she sang it subsequently at the Metropolitan, because she had sung it here.

Pfaff: The '74 one, however, was with Nilsson and Thomas.

Adler: But that I didn't conduct.

Pfaff: No, you didn't.

Adler: Oh, pardon me, it's the same production. And Haugk came back with Jones, then, in 1980.

Who was in '74?

Pfaff: It was Haugk directing, but it was Nilsson and Jess Thomas.

Adler: Really, in '74?

Pfaff: Yes.

Adler: Oh, I know where my memory took me. I had told Mr. Haugk when I conducted in 1980 that I would like to try a couple of changes, which he agreed to try. And that was the problem. And also, you know, the individual staging of Jones became very difficult, because she didn't know the music. It was [Spas] Wenkoff who sang, who at the moment is--I don't want to use the word "erratic"--he is sometimes good, sometimes less good. I found him an extremely distinguished artist, very musical and with some vocal problems and with some problems of stage appearance, etc. But I enjoyed my work with him.

What I remember from that Tristan which I liked so much was [Simon] Estes. I thought he was a very, very good King Marke. The

voice did not have the real bass quality you desire, but he gave a highly emotional performance and I am proud that I worked this role from scratch with him. It came out very well.

Pfaff: Well, if you remember, you had a stunning King Marke in 1974, too; it was Kurt Moll. He made the same impression, he just stopped the show with that.

Adler: He still does.

Pfaff: I'm not surprised that you were reminded of Gwyneth Jones arriving sick, because if I'm not mistaken, in 1974 when Nilsson showed up for the Isolde, she had just had that fall and had the broken ribs still.

Adler: Mr. Groupie, I'm sorry I don't remember.

Pfaff: [Chuckles] I just remember in the second act for the love duet, they were supposed to sort of sit down on the rock, she and Thomas, and she had a great deal of trouble just sitting down and getting back up again.

Adler: Really?

Pfaff: Yes, it was painful for her.

Adler: My friend Birgit--I have so many positive memories of her that the handicap is not in my memory.

Pfaff: Oh, well, she still sang just magnificently; I'll never forget those performances.

Esclarmonde

Pfaff: Before we leave [1974], I'd like to talk a little bit more about Esclarmonde. When there were things that Mr. [Richard] Bonyngé wanted to do, how did it work out, when it wasn't necessarily your idea to do a piece? Did he have to talk you into doing Esclarmonde? That was a big risk--

Adler: I didn't know it, and when he talked about it, I looked into this piece. As we all know now, Massenet tried to be Wagnerian in that opera, and I was very much interested in what could come out of this. [Speaking to child] Roman, what are you doing?

Roman: Nothing.

Adler: I thought it would be interesting to try Joan Sutherland in such a thing. She was not entirely happy in this opera.

Pfaff: Really?

Adler: No, at that time especially, when she was still very much interested in dramatic coloratura roles, she rightly saw some problems in singing this kind of music. But I think we all were very glad that we did it.

Pfaff: That was before there was that sort of Massenet rage that followed it.

Adler: Oh, yes.

Pfaff: And it was one of the early ones. Did you feel like you were taking a great risk?

About La Bohème and Some Memorable Mimis

Adler: Any performance is a risk. Any production is a risk. When you do a new Bohème you take a risk. If you schedule an old Bohème--I remember we had years or seasons when La Bohème wouldn't draw here. You wouldn't believe it. If we would check the exact box office statement, we would see that there were a couple of seasons where La Bohème was played too often. We had come to a point where the regular opera public wanted to hear more different works. So they probably said, "Oh, we have had La Bohème again," and so on. And perhaps the casts available at that time were not quite what the public wanted.

Pfaff: Was this later on that Bohème was having trouble?

Adler: It must have been the late sixties or early seventies. I'm not quite sure, but I remember when we discussed repertoire, I said finally, "Well, it's too bad, but we cannot do La Bohème." Maybe I didn't even say it's too bad, because I am glad we cannot do La Bohème every year; for many seasons this was every year.

Pfaff: Is that perhaps one of the reasons that you brought it back in '73, that you had such a perfect cast for it? You had [José] Carreras and [Teresa] Stratas in '73, and they looked so much the part.

Adler: Was that the year of the Ponnelle Bohème?

Pfaff: No, that was later [1978]; that was with [Ileana] Cotrubas.

Adler: Who was it, Cotrubas and--?

Pfaff: And [Giacomo] Aragall.

Adler: Every lyric tenor wants to sing Rodolfo. Every lyric soprano wants to sing Mimi. And if you think back on the different Mimis that we have heard here, you can see that there could have been a saturation of the public. For example, I am thinking of Licia Albanese, Dorothy Kirsten, Renata Tebaldi, Stella Roman, Leontyne--no, Price never sang Mimi.

Pfaff: Not Mimi.

Adler: Cotrubas, Stratas.

Pfaff: And didn't [Graziella] Sciutti sing Mimi?

Adler: Sciutti sang Musetta. But along with Dorothy Kirsten and Albanese being here every year, and not studying too many new roles--although I must say Dorothy Kirsten studied some new roles for us, and that should be recognized. She did after all the [William] Walton opera, Troilus and Cressida. (She never learned the whole last act, but she did it.) And she did the Montemezzi, of course, L'Amore dei Tre Re. And she did the [Dialogues of the Carmelites]. She learned some roles for us.

Pfaff: Did she learn Minnie in La Fanciulla del West?

Adler: She wanted to do Minnie very badly. Which soprano does not want to do Minnie? I don't think she had done it before.

Pfaff: Yes, I think that was first here.

Adler: When we're talking about Mimi we shouldn't forget Rosanna Carteri. Carteri was a wonderful singer who unfortunately was not here too often and didn't sing very long, and I don't really know why. But she was wonderful.

Pfaff: She must have been before my time, because the name is completely unfamiliar to me.

Adler: Really?

Pfaff: Yes. What do you recall of her?

Adler: I recall The Portuguese Inn, a Cherubini opera we did. I recall Mimi and some Mozart. She was a lovely girl, beautiful girl. She sang the Massenet Manon. She was a beautiful artist.

Pfaff: Oh, did she sing the '71 Manon--no, that was Sills.

Adler: I am not an historian.

Nikolaus Lehnhoff: Salome (1974) and Die Frau ohne Schatten (1976)

Pfaff: The first time I find Nikolaus Lehnhoff's name in the annals is in 1974 when he came to direct what had been the Wieland Wagner Salome. It's my understanding that he was a disciple of Wieland Wagner or one of the late protégés of Wagner. How did you find out about him?

Adler: Whether he was a protégé or not, I really don't know. Wieland had some seminars in Bayreuth, and, for instance, Paul Hager came from there, Skalicki came from there, and so on. Probably Lehnhoff came also from there. Whether he was a protégé really, or not, escapes me.

I don't remember that Salome, but what I remember of Lehnhoff is the Frau ohne Schatten he did. He did Die Frau ohne Schatten together with Jörg Zimmermann, the Swiss designer, and Karl Böhm conducting. I have not seen too much of his other work. But Die Frau ohne Schatten was really very good, except for the ending. Like everybody else, he didn't find quite the solution for the ending.

Pfaff: It's a problem ending.

Adler: Yes. Jean-Pierre Ponnelle did the first Frau ohne Schatten here, and he was drafted before he could finish. He said he had a design for the ending--he didn't stage it, he only designed it--but I never saw it. He was in Morocco when we performed it, and I remember making a phone call to Morocco after the first performance of it.

Child: [Showing a drawing] Here.

Adler: Thank you. Is that you?

Child: Yes.

Adler: Ohhh. Look at that. Does it look like you?

Child: Yes. [Showing to interviewer] Here.

Pfaff: Thank you, Roman. That's very nice. That does look like you.

Child: Yes.

Adler: [Laughter] So sweet.

Pfaff: What do you recall of Lehnhoff's style when he was directing Die Frau? One of the things that strikes me as an audience member is that it looks like it's almost choreographic. Everything seems to be almost danced and very detailed.

Adler: Well, I think that he got much into the fairy tale aspects of Die Frau ohne Schatten. One has to be very careful--he had a big success with Frau ohne Schatten and I think he does it now in many places--but I don't think it is really the fairy tale aspects which make a success in Frau ohne Schatten. It is the variety--the variety of color, in drama, in music, in everything, you know?

Child: [Comes in again with another drawing] Here!

Adler: Lehnhoff is a very, very intelligent man, but I wondered at times if there couldn't be another way of rehearsing than he had.

Pfaff: What was his way?

Adler: He lacked charm. Let's put it very mildly this way. Not necessarily in his work, in the results of his work, but in the way that he rehearsed or talked to people and so on.

Pfaff: Was he blunt?

Adler: Yes, and not always pleasant. But good, but good. It was difficult to work with him, but the result--

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Adler: I'm trying to think back; who else was in this Salome?

Pfaff: Rysanek sang the title part, and it was Hans Hopf as Jochanaan.

Adler: No, Hopf would be Herod. Who was Jochanaan?

Pfaff: [Siegfried] Nimsgern was Jochanaan and Varnay was Herodias.

Adler: I remember mainly Nimsgern in this performance, and I felt that Nimsgern abused his voice. He was singing so loudly in this performance that one could have heard him on the street with closed doors. He was quite good, but overdone.

Karl Böhm in San Francisco: 1976

Pfaff: While we're on the subject of that Frau, why don't we talk just a little bit about what was involved in the long-awaited debut of Karl Böhm. How long had you been talking to him about this? I know that Rysanek had been talking to him, too.

Adler: Böhm was scared that the orchestra would not be good enough for what he wanted; that all the conditions of his work would not be met--not only here, anywhere--he was difficult. He had a few theaters where he worked, and otherwise he did symphony, you know? So it took quite a while. Then we had a mutual friend, Cynthia Wood, who suggested to him that he really should come here, and it was she who gave me the production also. That was not a cheap production.

When he came, it wasn't easy. He had all kinds of thoughts, problems. The chair in which he sat wasn't right, the stand wasn't right so we made a new stand for him, and this and that. The chair was not a problem, it was the stand. He sat on an ordinary chair, but then he conducted very small, and the orchestra had to get used to him. And I must say, it was one occasion where even friends of mine in the orchestra were not quite of the behavior I would have wanted, you know? They didn't show the respect for the old man that I think they should have accorded, and they had to overcome all this.

The results, as you know, were very good, but he was terribly sensitive about certain things.

Pfaff: It's my understanding that you really had to negotiate strongly between him and the orchestra to keep them together.

Adler: I had to use psychology and get the gentlemen and old gentleman to cooperate better than they did. You know, this is a case, when you talk about pit conducting--the man, of course, had an incredible experience in pit conducting--but he was ahead in years. And the orchestra at that time wasn't used to him. His beat was small, mostly.

Pfaff: I think it was Commanday who called it a micro-beat.

Adler: Yes, probably. And an orchestra that knew Böhm had no problems with this, naturally. But it means more concentration in the pit for the player, because a bigger beat is more easily seen, naturally. On the concert podium, when the majority of the orchestra sits in front of the conductor, it is easier to see the beat. And then there's the question of light on the conductor, and so forth. Also, although the orchestra played Die Frau ohne Schatten very well, finally, they had not played it very often. But it belongs to memories which I am glad to be able to have, because I had the greatest respect for Böhm.

Perhaps it helped that my son, who is one of the resident directors of the Munich Opera, [knew] Böhm. Ronald--Ronald is his full name; I call him Ronnie--was terribly nice to Böhm, whom he adored and whom he respected, and when he conducted in Munich, Ronald tried to make things as easy for him as possible. And maybe that affected old man Böhm, too.

[Child making noise] Come on, you guys! I think we have to get off.

XIII 1975 AND 1976

[Interview 14: May 22, 1985] ##

The 1975 Season

The Coronation of Poppea

Pfaff: One of the things about the 1975 season that makes it stand out is that there were so many new productions. I wanted to ask you first about L'Incoronazione di Poppea. Why was it that you chose to present a Baroque opera in a modern house?

Adler: Well, you cannot [produce opera in a] Baroque house if you don't have one, but at the same time, L'Incoronazione di Poppea is certainly a work that should be heard and seen. I talked to Dr. Rennert about it for several years, and he was very anxious to do it. He had the idea he wanted to do Poppea in San Francisco, and we were also discussing Semele and other Handel operas, but somehow we didn't quite find the right cast. I think we found a very good cast for L'Incoronazione, and he had done it with designer Ita Maximowna before. So it was only natural that we brought over Maximowna, whom I knew from Europe. Maestro Raymond Leppard, we thought, was an excellent stylist for this kind of work, and so he did it.

I should mention that I heard my first Poppea in Vienna with Karajan conducting the modern version, and Christa Ludwig as Poppea. I am not a purist and I didn't object to the large modern orchestra; I found it was a most exciting evening.

If you want to be a purist, however, then the Leppard version is preferable, and I'm glad that it had the same success here. Tatiana Troyanos certainly was a splendid Poppea and Eric Tappy was exciting as Nero. I was a little disappointed in the end of the first part; this wonderful chorus. That I wasn't very happy with; I don't know why.

Peter Meven, the Seneca, developed very much; he was young when he was here, and had a voice of extremely beautiful lyric quality, but maybe he was a little young for Seneca at that time. He, incidentally, is singing Sachs now and such things, and I understand doing quite well. But it was one new production I'm glad I did.

Pfaff: It wasn't characteristic of your administration for you not to have an active hand in the edition. Why was it that you let Leppard just go his way and use his edition?

Adler: Because I didn't consider myself an expert, while Maestro Leppard is certainly an expert in this kind of style. So obviously I had to give him a free hand. I did the same thing when we did those kinds of works in the Spring Opera.

Monteverdi's Orfeo is an example--I don't think it can be considered old-fashioned, whether this is in 1975 or in 2075. I think it will live.

The Queen of Spades and Mstislav Rostropovich

Adler: You wanted me to say something about Queen of Spades. The Queen of Spades is definitely a work that should be in the repertoire of an opera company every few years at least. It is very strong, dramatic, a good play. I got Rostropovich to conduct it, which gave me the feeling that we were approaching this work with authenticity.

Well, the reception was not entirely positive. It is true that at that time Maestro Rostropovich was rather new to opera conducting, but not to conducting in general. He is a fabulous musician and man, and the orchestra sensed this and they played for him. He got a very special sound from the orchestra, I think, and he got a very positive human reaction from the players.

Well, the press was mixed and there was one [Stephanie von Buchau] who accused Maestro Rostropovich in the worst way of being an amateur and accused me of engaging Rostropovich so he could learn how to conduct at the San Francisco Opera. The whole thing was written in such an unpleasant and insulting way that I got mad, and on the spur of the moment, I told the opera press people that Maestro Rostropovich was not only our guest, but my guest of honor that season, and that the critic who received passes to write her insulting criticism was also a guest, and that if a guest insulted

a guest of honor, then I wouldn't invite this guest anymore. I suggested that we withdraw the critic's press tickets, and when that was done, it caused a scandal. I was highly amused by this, actually, but the truth is that I believe that critics are fully entitled to their personal opinions.

We offer artists the privilege of giving a personalized artistic interpretation of the role which he sings and performs, and I think the same is true for critics, if they are ethically and aesthetically acceptable. But this review was neither, and therefore it really got under my skin, which isn't often the case. I am used to poor write-ups, you know. So that is what happened, and the whole thing was a rather fascinating little episode in the world of music critics.

Pfaff: There are people who say they don't read critics, and there are people who say that they read everything. Did you read everything that was written about the company?

Adler: No. I think that could be a waste of time. If you are as much involved in creative work as I was, you have to watch your time. It is well known that I worked from nine-thirty or ten o'clock in the morning until midnight, so more you can't do.

Pfaff: How did this particular review come to your attention, do you remember? Did you find it on your own, or did someone show it to you?

Adler: Someone gave it to me; the press department must have given it to me. The press department gave me all the write-ups and pointed out what was worthwhile reading, and this was worthwhile reading because it was so incredible.

Pfaff: Do you remember how long the stricture against this critic coming to the house was in effect?

Adler: No. No, obviously after a while we changed it. But it continued to flare-up for a while.

Pfaff: In what way do you mean that? Were other critics angry at you?

Adler: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Some critics who were very good friends of mine thought that I was wrong, that I shouldn't have done it.

Pfaff: Was it perceived as curbing the freedom of the press?

Adler: Probably. But it's a true story; that's the way it happened and I lost my temper. Contrary to what they say, I really didn't do it too often.

We had done Pique Dame before with McCracken, and I think that Paul Hager staged it [1963]. There was a rather interesting ending which was changed.

When Rostropovich conducted we opened quite a few cuts, and I think rightly so, because the first time we cut the opera much too much. I am for good cuts, but it lost a little color. Sometimes by concentrating the action too much, a highly romantic, dramatic opera like Pique Dame loses something. Rostropovich opened cuts, especially in the beginning.

Pfaff: You said that Rostropovich was actually eager to do the work.

Adler: Indeed. Naturally I asked him, "What would you like to conduct?"

Pfaff: At what point did you conceive of the idea of giving him his American opera debut as a conductor? Had he already been conducting?

Adler: Oh yes, he had been conducting. Not too much, but he had conducted and wanted to conduct.

Was [Regina] Resnik the Countess both times?

Pfaff: Yes, she was.

Adler: That was certainly something very, very special; one of her great portrayals.

The Magic Flute

Pfaff: On to what would have been a new production of The Magic Flute: you commissioned one from Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, and it never quite materialized. What was it that happened?

Adler: As long as I have been here, frankly, San Francisco Opera has never had a Magic Flute production which satisfied me. Jean-Pierre Ponnelle had had an enormous success with his Magic Flute production in Salzburg at the festival, and I thought it would be wonderful if he would create a production for San Francisco.

Well, that was one of the years when Ponnelle was too busy, and for a long time we didn't get any suggestions or sketches. Finally he came up with an idea, and what he basically tried to do

was to duplicate the Felsenreitschule on the stage of the San Francisco Opera. And he wanted to make the whole thing black.

I had had a very bad experience with Dino Yannopoulos trying to duplicate the Acropolis in Gluck's Orfeo here, and I was worried that trying to build some structure that would look like the galleries of the Felsenreitschule in Salzburg wouldn't work. Also I couldn't reconcile black with the music of The Magic Flute, so I discussed it with Jean-Pierre, and since he had no time to design something completely new, we gave up. We used the last Magic Flute production and arranged the columns in a slightly different way.

Then something happened that I really would like to mention as a warning. We rehearsed this Magic Flute in a hall with the scenery that would be used, but the stage was too small for the scenery, and nobody, not the singers, not the chorus, had the entrances where they should have had them, nor was the slightest feeling for this wonderful opera possible.

Day after day we spent hours trying to get what we couldn't get in this room, and this is the thing that I believe should be made very clear to young stage directors and technical directors: there are certain rehearsals which cannot be done in certain areas because neither the piece, the drama, or the music can stand it.

Pfaff: Can you remember why it was that Ponnelle wanted to set the thing in the Felsenreitschule, in a re-creation?

Adler: He had had an enormous success in the Felsenreitschule and he hadn't very much time to think it through or to design or execute it. His idea was so complicated that the technical director told me that we could not plan on less than twenty hours to put up the set Ponnelle had made. Just a moment, please. [To his wife in the next room] Nancy, who designed it?

Mrs.

Adler: Was it the Businger?

Adler: Probably, yes.

Mrs.

Adler: It was the old Businger redone.

Adler: Yes, that's right. It was a production designed by Toni Businger based on very elegant columns, and Jack O'Brien, the stage director, changed positions and elevations of the columns. But it didn't quite work, and I never was quite happy with it.

Pfaff: You said that your technical people told you that it was going to be very expensive to do and that it was going to take a long time to set up. Were they looking at a model at that point, or drawings?

Adler: No, the model was not made yet. They were looking at drawings. For a production in a good American theater you use both drawings and models.

Pfaff: But it wasn't at the model stage yet.

Adler: It wasn't; it didn't get that far.

You raised the question, why in English? Well, I don't think that you can do the dialogue, which is so important in The Magic Flute, in anything but English. The question arises about which translation to use. There are not any really good translations; there are acceptable ones.

When Ponnelle directs The Magic Flute, he has every word of the dialogue spoken, and I always say to him, "Where do you find all those sentences? They don't exist in the original version." But he has them. I don't believe that it is necessary to do every word in the dialogue, but you have to be very, very careful [in deciding] what to leave out. We talked about the Fidelio dialogue, and we saw what happened there by positioning the sentences differently and making cuts.

The Magic Flute dialogue is probably as important as the music; I agree with Ponnelle on this, but you have to time it, and you have to think about the singers. Singers who don't have as many rehearsals as Ponnelle probably had in Salzburg will not succeed as well if the dialogue is too long, and the time for rehearsals [here] is simply too short.

Pfaff: Is this the production that is still being used in Salzburg?

Adler: Yes. But when Ponnelle redirects his own productions he always makes changes, and that is only good and natural, because in 1999 we certainly won't be the same people as we were in 1994.

On Translations and Translators

Pfaff: Was this the year that you did the Andrew Porter English translation; is that the one you chose? Or was it Ruth and Thomas Martin?

Adler: I'm not sure. It wasn't very good, whatever it was.¹

You know, in the beginning the Ruth and Thomas Martin translations did not seem too bad, but they did too many, and I think they got worse. I think our demands increased also.

When I was new in this country I played around and tried to translate some. I remember that I tried to translate Cavalleria [Rusticana]. The Martins used words in their translation which would sound a little bit like the words in the original language, which is very good and desirable, but it doesn't always pay off in the translations.

It is quite interesting that in Salzburg, where you have an international public, the Flute with the German dialogue uncut was an enormous success. Perhaps Ponnelle is so strong in his direction that the public understands the words. But for that you need a Ponnelle talent, and you need the time that Ponnelle has.

Pfaff: You also said that you were less than happy with the musical results, as well as the scenic results.

Adler: Well, I'll tell you something. The rehearsals were so difficult that we didn't make the progress that I wished we would have made. The cast didn't get close to each other, and I don't think we got much closer to Mozart. I grew up with The Magic Flute and in those small theaters [in Europe] the results were really very good. Maybe when you are used to a German Magic Flute it is difficult to accept an English Magic Flute. Schikaneder wrote Papageno for himself in a certain German dialect which was very special, and the Vienna State Opera had a very good Magic Flute, which I heard I don't know how many times before I came to the United States.

Pfaff: You also expressed some dissatisfaction with the way certain singers accomplished their roles. What was the problem vis-à-vis [Kiri] Te Kanawa as Pamina? The press liked her.

Adler: I think I cannot say more. First of all, I would never talk against an artist who is a friend of mine and whom I respect a great deal. But I believe I summed it up with the remark that we didn't get close enough to each other in rehearsals.

Pfaff: Was this the only time you used the building on Oak Street for rehearsals?

¹It was the Martin translation in 1975.

Adler: No. Before the Zellerbach rehearsal building existed, we rehearsed there because it was fairly close to the opera house. We have talked about the Armory building, and we rehearsed in other places, too.

Pfaff: Did this building pose similar problems for other productions, or was it just the size of the Flute production that made it difficult?

Adler: It was impossible to create any kind of atmosphere there. There was a better atmosphere in the Armory. Of course the Armory was the opposite--it was so vast. But I don't think back on this with pleasure.

Simon Boccanegra

Pfaff: Another one of the new productions that year was the Simon Boccanegra, which was shared with Chicago. It was a Gramma Fisher production, as I understand. Certainly no problem with Te Kanawa there, at least from the standpoint of the press. What are your memories of this particular production?

Adler: Excuse me--there was no problem with Kiri. It is just that Pamina in The Magic Flute is something so special that I wanted to be able to do more.

Who designed this production?

Pfaff: It was Pier Luigi Pizzi.

Adler: Who directed it here?

Pfaff: Sonja Frisell. I believe it was her company debut.

Adler: She assisted Ponnelle before that. Simon Boccanegra is a wonderful opera, and it is a very, very difficult opera, dramatically, and musically. I was pleased that it was a big success.

In 1975, incidentally, I am not sure that we had the agreement with the Gramma Fisher Foundation that we would present in San Francisco a production made for, in that case, the Chicago Lyric Opera. We talked about that later on.

When Chicago did it, Chicago had worked with Pizzi. At that time I had not worked with Pizzi at all, and I don't know whether or not I would have chosen Pizzi to design Simon Boccanegra.

Pizzi was at some technical rehearsals and was very pleased here; he said that he liked what we did here almost better than what he saw in Chicago, however. The San Francisco War Memorial Opera House stage was not suited for certain things that we had to leave out.

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Adler: When one can work with Frisell in a certain atmosphere and a certain context, she is an excellent director. My best experience with her was when we worked on the new Masked Ball production, which to me was, except for one detail, highly satisfactory. She can be very tough, and when she gets mad she uses language a man would hardly use. But I forgive her for that.

Pfaff: Were you pleased enough with the production when you got it from Chicago? It happened to be playing at the same time there was a Verdi Congress going on there, and the Verdi scholars all decided that the production was at odds with the music and they gave it a hard time.

Adler: Well, I don't think that that is entirely true, but again, we changed it. They had certain elevations which we couldn't have, and so it looked differently and it played differently on the stage here. I think this production was a test whether or not you can share productions, which you know I am doubtful about.

Pfaff: When it is known that two companies are going to be using the same production, such as with Gramma Fisher, did you nonetheless do all of your own casting for it?

Adler: I'm not sure. But if you have the same conductor and the same stage director, it may be advisable to try to secure the same cast for both theaters. If you have enough rehearsal time, you can choose your cast, but unless the two companies cooperate in signing contracts with artists, it is very likely that you won't be able to get that particular cast, and sometimes you don't even want that.

Pfaff: Yes, I was thinking that you would definitely have your own ideas about the cast you would want. I was wondering if these productions ever came with a cast.

Adler: No, not necessarily. There are some agreements when productions are being exchanged which call for the same conductor and director and lighting designer and whatnot. Then you had better try to get the same cast, because it becomes much simpler. But this, as I said before, interferes with the artistic creativity of the

individual theater and the individual personalities. And then designers tend to design one production and live on it for a year, and don't develop.

The Flying Dutchman: Ponnelle and Controversy

Pfaff: The production that we've made many little allusions to but haven't ever talked about in detail is the Ponnelle [The Flying] Dutchman in 1975, which was probably one of the most talked-about productions in your whole tenure.

Adler: I think that the Ponnelle Dutchman was a very daring production, extremely stark, extremely clever. I think he has modified his idea about the Steersman/Erik duplication now, but at that time it was very, very strong. What bothered me in the production in the beginning were certain aspects of makeup. Ponnelle had this period during which the aesthetics of the makeup and the costumes of the singers were neglected. The people looked very interesting but not always aesthetically right, you know?

But the Dutchman was conceived and designed for San Francisco, and it created endless debates which sometimes ended in fist fights in the lobby of the opera house half an hour after the close of the performance. Basically it was effective theater and accepted, even if some of the public disagreed, and that's only to the good.

In New York it was something different, because New York wasn't used to an approach like Ponnelle's. Also, Ponnelle had accepted some scenic changes in New York, because the production was a little too small for the Met's stage and for the larger men's chorus there. So it didn't quite fit, it didn't quite work, and the public didn't know what to do with it. On the other hand, a few years later Chicago did this production and it was very successful.

Unfortunately when Ponnelle directed in New York, he wasn't very happy there, and he let some staging pass, which I thought was not very helpful for the production. The first time I saw what had happened was at the dress rehearsal at the Met. I had lunch with Ponnelle afterwards and I said that I thought the distances were wrong and that the singers were too far apart; certain things were too far upstage which in San Francisco were much more downstage.

There was also a different cast, and to my horror, I noticed in the performance that Ponnelle had asked the Senta, who was a rather tall girl, to kneel during the duet with the Dutchman, [because] I had objected to the fact that Senta had blocked him in

San Francisco. So this poor girl sang almost the entire end of the second act kneeling! I am afraid that I cannot say the New York production was really a success, while in Chicago, it was.

Pfaff: Did you have trepidations about making a change as significant as the one he made from what Wagner had written? Did he have to talk you into that?

Adler: No. No. I'll tell you why--it made a lot of sense. I didn't agree with everything, and if I had staged it, I most likely wouldn't have done it this way. But I believe in Ponnelle and I think he is one of the top stage directors of our day. I don't think he was wrong in the Dutchman, and it was certainly an incredible spectacle.

I saw the [Harry] Kupfer production in Bayreuth. And I must say that in comparison to the Kupfer production, Ponnelle was for me much, much stronger and better.

Pfaff: What didn't you like about Kupfer?

Adler: I would have to go into too many details, which we cannot do at the moment. I like Kupfer very much. I saw a Fidelio production of his, which he had done for the Dresden Opera, in Lausanne, conducted by Mr. Blomstedt. I found it overwhelming; overwhelming. I wouldn't say that everything was right, but it was so strong that you sat there and just inhaled it.

Pfaff: This is the Fidelio?

Adler: Right. In Bayreuth I really didn't like it. Also, the Senta is on the stage from A to Z--incidentally, they perform it also without intermission, and the poor lady who sang Senta was seven months pregnant, and really couldn't take it. During the beginning of the Dutchman she left the stage on her own and got an injection backstage to strengthen her because otherwise she might not have been able to finish. I may see it again in Bayreuth this summer; maybe I should. It obviously lasts many years in Bayreuth.

Pfaff: Well, the Ponnelle seems to keep going along, too.

Adler: I don't know. Where has it been done lately?

Pfaff: I'm not aware of it lately.

Adler: The last time was Chicago, I think, last year or two years ago, with [Siegmund] Nimsgern. There were problems with the stage director because the German cast did not want to accept the instructions of the American stage director in Chicago, and the

results were not very good. Again, what I said before--Ponnelle without Ponnelle, Wieland Wagner without Wieland Wagner, Mozart without Mozart.

Pfaff: An interesting part of The Flying Dutchman in '75 was that it was, I think, conducted by Kenneth Schermerhorn.

Adler: Here, yes.

Pfaff: He must have been quite a young man at the time.

Adler: Fairly young man; he was the conductor of the Milwaukee Symphony. I'm not sure that he was able to answer all of Wagner's prayers.

Pfaff: But you had him back for another Ponnelle production when you did the Cav/Pag [Cavalleria Rusticana and I Pagliacci].

Adler: Yes, which was wrong. I think that Cav/Pag is even less Schermerhorn's meat than the Dutchman was. The Italiano was missing, you know? But Ponnelle liked him and they worked very well together. So that's how it happened.

Pfaff: I was wondering if that was the reason that he came back the second time, because he worked well with Ponnelle.

Adler: Yes. At that time, if I remember right, there was no Italian conductor available who wanted to conduct Cavalleria/Pagliacci. There are many conductors who refuse, I think wrongly, to do those two. I think that the easier one is Pagliacci. Cavalleria is, for the conductor, a very difficult opera. I heard Cavalleria conducted by Mascagni repeatedly, and he was so slow that it was not effective. But that is not the point; it sounded well. He made the orchestra sound well. In Cavalleria the orchestration is such that the conductor has to do a lot in order to get good results. And it is very difficult to find the right man for that.

Il Tabarro and Gianni Schicchi

Pfaff: It's no wonder that Ponnelle was busy at the time of the Flute, because he did the Gianni Schicchi for you that same year.

Adler: Well, that is a one-act, so one-third of a new production. Gianni Schicchi I thought was directed in an incredibly spirited, intelligent and amusing way. I wasn't quite sure if this very steep set that he used in Schicchi was necessary, and it obviously

caused some problems. But then Ponnelle put it over, and I thought it was most fascinating.

Who did Tabarro?

Pfaff: It was Patrick Libby.

Adler: Was it good? I don't remember.

Pfaff: I don't remember it either. I'm not sure that I went.

Adler: Who sang that year? Brenda Roberts?

Pfaff: Yes, Brenda Roberts.

Adler: She is a very interesting American singer, of whom I thought very highly, but she was vocally and technically not up to the standards in San Francisco. She is singing now, I notice, in major houses, and I think with great success. She had a very strong personality, and the voice was right for Giorgetta in Schicchi. Wagner, no.

You see, you come to think highly of an artist, regardless of the success she has, and if you are entirely sure and you have heard her sing a role somewhere else, then I think you can take the chance and hope that your public will see in the singer what you see in the singer, or hear in that singer what you hear in that singer.

Pfaff: Another unusual aspect of that double bill, since it was only two-thirds of Il Trittico, is that it came from two different funding sources. The Tabarro was a Cyril Magnin production and the other was from James Robertson.

Adler: What happened was that we had rented the production of Tabarro from Rome, and it got stuck in the shipping strike, in Mexico. I thought that Cyril would be able, through his connections with the unions, to get this thing here and unloaded, but instead, he gave us a new production of Tabarro.

Pfaff: And then James Robertson gave Gianni Schicchi.

Adler: We discussed James Robertson last time. He was a very generous treasurer of the company who would always say, "Well, when I make money in the stock market, I will give you a new production." I said, "I hope I can influence the stock market."

You know, you mentioned something before about the Trittico. Puccini thought of it a little bit as an operatic symphony, with first, second, and third movements in those three one-act operas.

But when you do all three you feel frequently that it's too much for one evening. So Suor Angelica and Schicchi have been done, and as we did that time, Tabarro and Schicchi. The most popular opera in the triptych is Schicchi, but the triptych is not a big draw, box-office-wise, regardless of cast.

So here is a question: are you faithful to the composer, or are you practical and do what the public prefers? And the performers--three casts are more expensive than two, naturally, and to rehearse three operas is more expensive than two.

The 1976 Season

Thaïs

Pfaff: You opened the following season with a new Carl Toms's production of Thaïs in 1976.

Adler: I think we discussed this already.

Pfaff: Well, we just made a light allusion to it. You mentioned that there was something that you weren't happy about with the design.

Adler: It was over-designed. It was as much the fault of [Tito] Capobianco as it was of Carl Toms. I hadn't seen it; but between the two, Toms had designed God-knows-what in this production. I remember he came with the model to see me at the hotel in London.

If you have a designer or a director and you can't control them or you don't oversee things, you spend too much money. And that was the case. I don't think we could use all the parts in this production. I had another one which was over-designed: [The Brecht-Weill] Mahagonny, a Bob Darling production for the Spring Opera. We could by no means use everything that was designed.

Pfaff: Does that mean things were actually created as set pieces and then not used?

Adler: Well, sure. If the designer and the director say to a manager, meaning me in this case, "This will look wonderful; don't cut it," you will let it pass if you have the money. Then everybody sees it on the stage and says, "Sorry, it is too much."

I admired Toms greatly, but it lacked elegance, and Thaïs has to have a certain elegance. Massenet is a very elegant composer,

even when he is bad, which he is sometimes. That goes as well for his operas as for his orchestral music. Somehow, it was close to being cheap, with all the stuff that was designed, but it looked quite good after we got rid of some stuff. I think you have to recognize where you were weak and where you made mistakes and try to learn for the next time, so you make other mistakes the next time.

Pfaff: Beverly Sills opened the season in the part. Was it a part that she wanted to sing?

Adler: Yes. I had never heard Thais in performance and I cannot say that I like the opera particularly. But Beverly loved it, so there it was. Who conducted it?

Pfaff: That was John Pritchard.

Adler: Well, you know, Pritchard is a very elegant conductor and I think right for Massenet, so it could be that his musical interpretation didn't quite fit the scenery.

Pfaff: It was a very subtly conducted piece, I remember. And I remember also that Sills was really just heartbreaking in the role.

Adler: Yes. If I could have had her ten years earlier for it, it would have been better. Not necessarily for publication.

Pfaff: Well, this production is another one that, like Esclarmonde, traveled to the Met pretty much as it was here.

Adler: Yes. I don't remember if it was a success at the Met; was it? I don't think so.

Pfaff: No, not so much, at least not technically. What arrangements were made for this production to go to the Met?

Adler: Well, the second theater would pay all the expenses that were connected with getting it ready to ship, the shipment, and naturally the handling there.

Pfaff: But that was the extent of the charges?

Adler: It was an exchange. With the Met we were able to borrow some productions, but we didn't get very nice ones, I'm afraid. Chicago had few productions until we had co-productions; they were renting scenery from Italy and sending it back, which I thought was not what a theater should do. A theater of importance has to have a certain amount of productions in the warehouse that belong to the theater. That's why I didn't like the idea of sharing productions,

because a production should be characteristic of the way you produce opera.

In Europe this is much less the case, because the theaters--take the German opera houses--are so close together. People who are really interested in opera will go from Stuttgart to Frankfurt to Dusseldorf to Cologne to hear the same opera. Well, they certainly wouldn't do this if they would see the same set all over, would they?

Financing New Productions

Pfaff: In a case like Esclarmonde or Thaïs, both of which were pretty clearly mounted with a particular soprano in mind would you have created productions for them had there not been private sponsors?

Adler: Sir, you should have asked me this before they were created. I don't know. Probably not, because I don't think the money would have been available, and I don't think that with the amount the board made available for productions I could have done it. The rule was, if I wanted to do a new production, I had to say, "Here's the cash." I usually got what I wanted.

Pfaff: I'm just thinking that these two operas and other operas like them present special problems inasmuch as they're not likely to be in the repertory when the singers aren't there any longer.

Adler: I think that may be true for Esclarmonde. I'm not sure that it is true for Thaïs. There is probably many a good soprano who would love to do Thaïs if she knew that there was a production available. If you read the history of opera, discounting the Metropolitan of course, you'll find that productions are created for certain singers all the time.

Pfaff: But in your company, which you try to run in a very fiscally responsible and basically frugal way, would you have taken the risk without a private gift to do an opera that was so much associated--

Adler: No. There were years when I really had to be very, very careful. I just didn't have any new productions unless I had a private gift. I couldn't put them on, and I don't think that the board would have okayed it. You see, that was politics with the board, I didn't ask them to okay such things. I felt that it was wrong, because the company just didn't have [the money].

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Adler: So I didn't ask for it, but if I had the cash and asked for it, that's another story.

I must say that there were operas for which I was able to raise the money when I would have been happier to raise money for another opera. But there are certain practical reasons why we do certain things, and I must say that I believe I wasn't wrong, because the San Francisco Opera flourished with this kind of attitude.

La Forza del Destino

Pfaff: In 1976 you acquired a new production of La Forza del Destino, which you also conducted. I know it was another difficult one for you in terms of casting because of the cancellations.

Adler: Well, let's talk a moment about the production, because it is a very interesting thing. In Italy a designer tells the technical director what he wants. He may draw some pictures, some renderings of the set, but he will not do the technical drawings. We had a designer who delivered ideas which seemed very good, but were almost impossible to execute. We didn't have the people who could do it this fast.

I must say that the gentleman who put us in this position is a fabulous painter, but technically he was a little naive about what could be done on the stage. I should say, perhaps, naive at that time; I think he has done much more since. So we had a problem with the production, to execute it and get on the stage what we wanted. I'm not sure we ever did, because our technical director was not used to making all the technical drawings, and our staff wasn't used to it.

Pfaff: Was this John Priest that it fell on? Was he the technical director?

Adler: Yes. But I know there were problems. There was a language problem, and he didn't know himself how some things were done technically.

For instance, I don't think he realized the technical problems of the Inn Scene, what we wanted to do with the prayer, and with the chorus, which we didn't want to have backstage entirely. And so on.

Who was the stage director?

Pfaff: It was Alberto Fassini to begin with, and then when the second cast took over, it was [Matthew] Farruggio. I was wondering how much it changed?

Adler: Fassini cannot have been a very strong man, because I don't remember working with him. I have not the slightest recollection. I remember the name very well, but that's it. The stage director obviously was brought by the designer.

Pfaff: Samaritani?

Adler: Yes, I'm pretty sure. [Pfaff looks it up.] You won't find it in there. Mr. Bloomfield does not believe in stage directors.

Pfaff: I know he doesn't, but he actually slipped this one in. Pierluigi Samaritani, yes.

Adler: Samaritani is now directing, like [Pier Luigi] Pizzi. You see, Pizzi was originally a designer, and then he became a director/designer.

Pfaff: Like Ponnelle and some of the others.

Adler: Yes. But who was in the cast?

Pfaff: [Anna] Tomowa-Sintow in her company debut.

Adler: I have the highest opinion of Tomowa-Sintow, and I like very much to work with her. I told Karajan about her, and as you know she is now Karajan's favorite soprano.

Pfaff: She sings everything for him.

Adler: I think she was very good in that role. Who else was in it that year? I think the bass was [Kolos] Kovats, wasn't it? The Hungarian bass?

Pfaff: Yes, it was.

Adler: He wasn't bad, but--who else?

Pfaff: Well, this is the year of the tenors. You went through five, I believe. It was supposed to be [Vladimir] Atlantov; he is the one you had scheduled. Bloomfield is very vague about that. What was the problem with Atlantov? Was it a political problem, or was it an artistic problem?

Adler: He cancelled. I don't remember. I don't think it was a political problem, although he has never sung in the States yet, has he?

Pfaff: Once, on a Bolshoi tour.

Adler: And didn't he sing in Dallas or somewhere down there once? Atlantov in those days was mainly entrenched in Vienna. He had considerable vocal problems, and I am not so sure that he wanted really to sing Forza. If it were Otello or Pagliacci perhaps he would have come; I don't know. He is a very, very good artist.

But then came the tenors, and I certainly wasn't lucky with them.

Pfaff: You weren't lucky with them?

Adler: No! There were no real tenors for Forza in those days. There still aren't. The Forza tenor has a very, very difficult role. Who was the baritone?

Pfaff: It was Renato Bruson.

Adler: I remember once I was short of a baritone--now I don't know which opera it was, and Bruson had arrived in Chicago late that afternoon. I reached him at his hotel, told him I needed him immediately, and Mr. Bruson was kind enough to get on a plane and come. He had just arrived from Europe, and Chicago cooperated, too. But I don't know if this was [the same season]. I remember doing Forza with Bruson. He has really one of the most beautiful voices available now. Very even. Who was Melitone?

Pfaff: Domenico Trimarchi.

Adler: Trimarchi. I am sorry, my memory gives out. I have been with this company from '43 to '82, and it is possible that one mixes up or forgets. And Forza was given frequently.

I remember one Forza, however, that I conducted. It was in Los Angeles on a Sunday afternoon, and in the cast was Herva Nelli. I like to say that Toscanini, who had a lot to say about Herva Nelli, allowed her to sing here when he heard that I was conducting. The tenor was [Jan] Peerce, and the baritone was Bob Weede. Now the bass could have been [Nicola] Rossi-Lemeni, or [Nicola] Moscona, because both sang it that year, I think. And [Salvatore] Baccaloni. But for some reason, that performance, on a Sunday afternoon, a very warm fall day in Los Angeles, not very well-attended, in the Shrine Auditorium, was a performance which was so good, that everybody who heard it said, "This is a performance which should have been recorded." It was that good.

You see, everything worked that afternoon. That happens. And afterwards, there was a party somewhere in Beverly Hills. I don't know who the people were who gave the party, but there was a big swimming pool with water lilies and flowers in it, a beautiful outdoor party in Beverly Hills. There were quite a few people who had not been at the performance, and when they heard about it, they regretted deeply that they didn't come. It was an unforgettable performance.

Cavalleria Rusticana and I Pagliacci

Pfaff: This was the year, 1976, of the new Ponnelle Cavalleria Rusticana and I Pagliacci double bill. The Cavalleria, of course, was one of the other most controversial things that Ponnelle did. One of the problems that people seemed to have with it was his depiction of the religious figures and the religious aspects of the drama, which has been said to be a problem with him in general. What was your feeling about that?

Adler: He maintained that he had seen Easter processions in Sicily, from which he copied what he staged in the Cavalleria here. I didn't like it either. As a matter of fact, it is one of the rare occasions when he left after the opening, and I don't know if it was after the second performance, but very soon I spoke with him on the phone, and I told him the change I wanted, and he agreed. So it was modified. He is going to do Cavalleria/Pagliacci in Vienna during the festival.

Pfaff: A new production?

Adler: Yes. Pagliacci with Domingo and Cavalleria. I wouldn't have pushed him to change the Cavalleria if I hadn't had the feeling that I was doing a service to the public and to Jean-Pierre. As I mentioned, we were friends, we were close enough, Jean-Pierre and I. I think it depends very much on how you ask it, and how talented the man is of whom you ask it. And you must make some sense in what you suggest, and not just say, "Oh, that doesn't go." Those are things you learn, and it leads to success in the long run, and to successful collaboration.

Whatever I have said about Jean-Pierre, we may disagree, but I love to work with him, and he was also delighted with our collaboration. We collaborated so much that he is the godfather of my little daughter, Sabrina.

Pfaff: One of the things that seems to be a feature of many Ponnelle productions is that when one gets into religious elements, and particularly if they're Catholic, there seems to be an element or an attitude of almost mockery sometimes. For example, at the altar in Tosca and during this Easter procession--is this true?

Adler: No, I am sorry. In my recollection the Easter procession was not mockery, but cruelty. People who are really beaten and--what do you call this?

Pfaff: Flagellated.

Adler: Flagellated. That is what it was, and Jean-Pierre said to me, "You must believe me, I have seen it."

Pfaff: Are you aware of anything about Jean-Pierre's attitude to religion in general?

Adler: No.

Pfaff: It does seem to come up over and again.

Adler: Where?

Pfaff: Well, I was thinking of the procession in Carmen early on, when the little boys are giving the priests trouble.

Adler: No. I am sorry, that I am sure had nothing to do with religion. You know, Ponnelle sometimes improvises in his direction. It may have been that he sat and he saw the boys running around when the priest crossed, and suddenly he had the idea it would be very funny if the kids were somehow running around, but I don't think it had anything to do with religion.

And I don't think that the mess behind the altar in the first act of Tosca had anything to do with religion. It is more reality; he had the feeling that the people who were maintaining the church, including the sacristan, were sloppy people and they didn't clean up very well. Things are that way, and I don't think that there was any anti-religious intent.

Pfaff: Was it an issue over the direction that caused [Leonie] Rysanek to withdraw from this production? She was going to sing the Santuzza in that Cavalleria and she withdrew.

Adler: Yes. I don't remember exactly, but there could have been many reasons. At that time, she probably did not feel secure in the low register for Santuzza. You see, in earlier days Santuzza was sung by singers like [Maria] Jeritza and so on. So naturally Rysanek

wanted to do it, too, but then, Jeritza sang Carmen and Rysanek never would have sung Carmen, and so on. Now she is singing lower roles. But I don't remember. I don't think that it had anything to do with a Catholic problem.

Pfaff: I was wondering if some of the problem was with the directions, since that seemed to be such a controversial production, paired with the Pagliacci that everyone loved from the first minute.

Adler: Yes, I think that the Pagliacci was a stroke of genius. I'm curious to know if he does it the same way now.

Pfaff: What was it that you particularly liked about the Pagliacci?

Adler: Well, there were so many ideas in it. I liked the idea of the public sitting upstage from the stage, so that the singers practically acted towards the people sitting upstage instead of to the public. With skillful direction, this worked very well.

Pfaff: Was it your idea to have Domingo sing both of the roles in the same production?

Adler: Well, we talked about it at that time. He's not doing it now. He's singing only Pagliacci. But we talked about it--and it had been done before--and it certainly looked attractive on paper. I am not so sure that it is a good idea.

Pfaff: But do you think it worked in the house?

Adler: It did and it didn't. But you know, I just remembered the mountain in Pagliacci, when Ponnelle had the little truck approach and come down the curve. This was a crazy idea, and then when he had to have a real truck on the stage for the scene between Nedda and Silvio, where it was performed in the--what do you call this?--cabin of the truck?

Pfaff: The cab, I think.

Adler: The cab. It wasn't entirely poetic, although Zeffirelli set the duet between Nedda and Silvio on the floor of a barn in the straw. They did it in the straw, you see? That was also, in those days, kind of daring. I'm pretty sure it was Zeffirelli at La Scala.

Pfaff: Were you pleased with Ponnelle's idea to update the piece in time, to bring it into the automotive era, as it were?

Adler: That didn't bother me.

Pfaff: I thought it was very effective, personally.

Adler: I don't think it mattered, because it didn't clash with the music. This wasn't his idea; it has been done frequently. To put Cavalleria/Pagliacci or Carmen in the present-day has been done very frequently.

I remember a little incident in Carmen in the German opera house where I was chorus director. It was performed in street clothes of the day; that was in the twenties. For some reason I think the chorus wasn't very sure in the first scene of the first act, so I went on the stage as I was, and lo and behold, Carmen makes her entrance and sees me standing there, and passes me. And when it comes to the "Habanera," she comes upstage where I was standing behind the choristers, grabs me and drags me all the way to the footlights. Then she acted the "Habanera" out with me as part of it.

The Makropulos Case

Pfaff: That same year you did another Janacek opera, The Makropulos Case, and you did it in English. What was your reason for doing it in English?

Adler: Well, I think The Makropulos Case is rather difficult to understand even if you understand the words. There are so many philosophical ideas in the text that it was important to do it in English. Was this the year--

Pfaff: Anja Silja sang the title part and Bill Lewis was in the cast.

Adler: Then it was the second time we did Makropulos. Who did the first? [Marie] Collier, no?

Pfaff: Yes, Marie Collier, in 1966.

Adler: I did it really the first time for Collier, because I thought that Collier was incredibly suited for this role. Silja did also a magnificent job, although she had a little problem with the English at that time. Her English now is very good, but at that time it was a little difficult for her.

Pfaff: Were you pleased with the way this production came out?

Adler: I believe the first time it was conducted by [Jascha] Horenstein, and that didn't work out so very well. The second time was [Christoph] von Dohnanyi. He is always very good, but I don't

think he had conducted Makropulos before, so there is probably more in it than we gave it--or let's say, not that we gave it, than we got out of it. It's an opera I like very much.

Some Debuts: Roberta Knie and Ursula Schroeder-Feinen

Pfaff: We've talked about the expansion of the pit and about the new Walküre production that year, but we haven't talked about a few debuts that I think were important. One was Roberta Knie as Brünnhilde. Since you weren't able to hear her at Bayreuth, how did you become familiar with her and how do you think she worked out?

Adler: Well, I had heard about her. I think she was an artist you had to take very seriously, but she was plagued by vocal problems, and as far as I know, she is not singing anymore. But as an artist, she had what it takes. And that I had heard, even though I had not heard her sing. Which year did she sing?

Pfaff: In 1976; the Walküre Brünnhilde. She had just come from singing it in Bayreuth for the centenary Ring.

Adler: It's not only the shoes you need for Wagner, as Birgit Nilsson says. You need also the voice. She had the voice, but it didn't come out naturally. She forced it in such a way that it didn't last.

Pfaff: What is this anecdote with Nilsson--about the shoes?

Adler: The story is that she told a younger soprano who wanted to sing a role--I think it was Isolde--"Be sure to have comfortable shoes when you do it. That is the main thing." But it ain't.

Pfaff: I notice Ursula Schroeder-Feinen made her company debut that year in Frau.

Adler: Similar case as Knie. I think that Schroeder-Feinen was an enormous artist with a beautiful voice, which she didn't treat right, and so it didn't last. I don't know what it was, but I seem to remember hearing that she had a sickness besides the problem of forcing her voice. But, at her best, she was unbeatable.

Pfaff: And she was still singing with [Karl] Böhm when they took it to the Met the following year.

Adler: Yes, well, this idea that some sopranos can sing anything--it depends on the conductor--I don't believe in this. There was a Bulgarian soprano, a very artistic lady who sang in Rosenkavalier, for instance, Sophie and Octavian, and she sang Susanna in Figaro, and she sang the Composer in Ariadne, Zerlina in Don Giovanni, and such, and to me it was sad that [Victor] de Sabata asked her to study Isolde. She said, "Maestro, why should I study Isolde? I can never sing Isolde." And de Sabata said, "When de Sabata conducts Tristan und Isolde, you can sing Isolde." But she would have sung one performance or not even one. It just isn't so.

Sure, it happens. When Teresa Berganza started singing Carmen people said that she couldn't sing Carmen because her voice wasn't dramatic enough. But between Ponnelle and myself, we were able to present a Carmen which was entirely believable. Of course, both Ponnelle and I are very good friends of hers, and Berganza felt especially good here in San Francisco when she sang Carmen. I hadn't heard from her in a long time and then last fall, all of a sudden, I got a phone call from her, from Chicago. And she said to me, "I sang Carmen last night and I missed you so much, and I wanted to tell you this."

But Carmen is another story. After all, it was written for a smaller house, and therefore Bizet wrote it lighter.

The Angle of Repose: A U.S. Bicentennial Commission

Pfaff: Let's move on to the Angle of Repose, which you did in conjunction with the centennial of San Francisco and the bicentennial of the United States.

Adler: I wanted to do an American world premiere during that bicentennial by a composer from the area, and someone recommended [Andrew] Imbrie to me. I didn't know very much about his music, but I heard his piano concerto at the Paul Masson Vineyards, which I found very good, and I talked to him. He came up with the Stegner novel, Angle of Repose. Stegner is an excellent writer, but I was wondering how one could make an opera libretto out of a novel of some 600 pages.

Stegner thought it should be done, and I must say I enjoyed Stegner very, very much, and I like the Angle of Repose. I had not known it before, but I read it, and it actually didn't take me too long because I found it fascinating. Stegner was very flexible and also highly intelligent, besides being a good writer. Then Imbrie came.

Pfaff: Where did the idea of using Oakley Hall to write the libretto come from? I know Stegner thought he couldn't do it. Was it Stegner's idea?

Adler: I'm not sure if it was Stegner or Imbrie, but Stegner had something to do with it. Now Imbrie was very stubborn to start with--he was not willing to listen to the conductor or to me or whomever, to make changes. But from the beginning I had Gerald Freedman in mind as director, and Jerry Freedman really talked to Imbrie about his very definite concept, and I remember his giving up his vacation and working on this a very long time somewhere in an isolated place.

It wasn't easy to do this work, production-wise. But I think we did it, with many ideas from Freedman, quite well.

Pfaff: What was your reason for choosing Douglas Schmidt as designer? Had you worked with him before?

Adler: I don't know if it was the first time or not, but Doug Schmidt is a very intelligent man and an intelligent designer, a skillful designer who knows a lot about technical facility and problems.

So we put the production on the stage, and the closer we came, we felt that the last twenty minutes or half hour were a serious problem for the success of the work. But Imbrie believed in what he had written and flatly refused to change it. Well, what do you do in such a case? You cannot cancel the performance. The conductor talked to him; I talked to him; he objected; I was accused of interfering with a composer.

And so it came to the performance, and I think it was a good performance, a good production. The orchestra did well. But it dragged out at the end and people lost interest. I had arranged the performances during the time when the International Association of Opera Directors met in San Francisco, and I hoped that some of my colleagues would be interested in performing it. I regret to say that nobody picked it up. All of them were interested in Jerry Freedman and in the production, and thought it was an excellent performance, but they didn't pick it up.

I don't know, but I wonder sometimes, retrospectively, if I'd stayed at the opera, if I would have tried later on to talk to Imbrie and to make some revisions and try it again. The production was still in the warehouse.

But there you have an example of how a composer, who is not too versed with the theater or with the opera public, can go wrong.

Pfaff: I had spoken with Imbrie at the time because of the university connection and his opera being done, and he himself admitted he was very late in providing you with the music. The music came in well past his deadline.

Adler: He was so slow in writing it was hard to believe.

Pfaff: Do you remember roughly what the time frame was from the commission to realization?

Adler: No.

Pfaff: Did he have a couple of years?

Adler: I'm sorry, I really don't remember. But you know, Imbrie is a very pedantic man, and I understand why it went so slowly, you know? But it didn't make it easy, I assure you. The intentions were good, and everybody wanted to make it a big success for a thousand reasons.

I remember on the day of the performance I gave a luncheon at a French restaurant for my colleagues in the Association, and they loved the food. Then there was a party in Mrs. Davies's Firehouse, and those were the successes, more than the performance of Angle.

Pfaff: This was Louise Davies?

Adler: Yes.

Pfaff: Did you ever work with her directly?

Adler: Oh, when I needed money I didn't hesitate to call. I remember her saying once, "When Adler calls he always wants money." So I surprised her once and didn't ask for money when I called her. [Chuckles] But we are on very friendly terms. She is a very amusing, bright, and generous lady.

The National Opera Institute

Pfaff: [Looking through records] I have here that the National Opera Institute co-sponsored Angle with the City of San Francisco. What was the National Opera Institute?

Adler: Well, the National Opera Institute is now the National Institute for Music Theater, of which I am a board member for life, I guess. The National Opera Institute supported artists, contemporary productions, contemporary opera, and they now do workshops. At the moment the chairman is Harold, Hal Prince. So this is an organization that feels opera should be music theater, but there is the problem of what is commercial and what is not commercial, and the question whether the Opera Institute should support commercial theater, which cannot be done if they get grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and others. It's a very complicated setup.

But the National Opera Institute is not a service organization. It is at best a combination of a service organization and other organizations. The Institute has also put on operas, and they put on all kinds of workshops, not only on the East Coast, but also--the last workshop was in St. Paul and Minneapolis. They worked on the last [Thomas] Pasatieri world premiere. I couldn't go, unfortunately.

Pfaff: Do you like Pasatieri's music?

Adler: I don't know. Sometimes I have the feeling he is a very talented man who writes too fast.

XIV 1977 AND 1978

[Interview 15: May 24, 1985] ##

The 1977 Season

The San Francisco Opera Chorus and Richard Bradshaw

Pfaff: Let's start, if we can, with the company debut of Richard Bradshaw. [He] came in 1977. What was the situation with the chorus prior to his coming, and why did you hire him?

Adler: Originally, when I came here, the chorus was the only part of the San Francisco Opera which was its own. The orchestra players were shared with the symphony; the stagehands, naturally, were shared with everybody; the singers were shared with everybody. But the chorus was San Francisco Opera's. And with pride I can say that [though] there were various chorus directors, the chorus was really excellent.

It was said that the chorus was running the company. I always said, "Better so, because that's what the company is," and when I had to give up the chorus, when I took over the job of director of the opera, I was looking really for someone who would maintain and improve it. I believed in better than best. But I really didn't find people. Since the majority of the repertoire was Italian, and I thought that Italian chorus masters should really know a lot about voices and hopefully improve the voices they would have to work with here, I looked in Italy for a chorus director. There were very good men, but it was not quite enough. I had a German chorus director for a short time, and that didn't work. So I was always looking out for a chorus director.

In 1976 when I engaged Mr. Bradshaw, the chorus was not available in the daytime at all. It was only gradually that we were able to secure daytime rehearsals, first on Saturdays, then for certain matinees and performances during the week. The chorus

is rather strongly union-regulated, but since I was negotiating the contracts with the union, I tried to get conditions which served the choristers, but served the opera too.

Now the system is different. As far as I know, there is a nucleus in the chorus of about twenty-four, and then there are extra choristers and filler-choristers. But the nucleus is available in the daytime.

When Bradshaw came, I found that his way of handling the chorus and of handling the conductors later on was really very helpful, and showed good results. Under his direction, the chorus really reached very good standards.

He also found an assistant. When I was chorus director, I would do everything myself. I had a regular pianist, Dora DiTano, and she and I worked together extremely well. I don't know any chorus director with any chorus accompanist who was as lucky as I was with Dora. But he had a regular accompanist for the chorus--and he has an assistant, Ernest Knell, who is a very capable, ambitious gentleman. So it's quite an operation, the way they work now. Different from the old days when Maestro Merola had vegetable men and bankers and ambulance drivers and whatnot in the chorus, rather than professional chorus singers.

I would like to say also that Richard Bradshaw is a very reliable person, a reliable man. I think it was very fortunate at that time, for me and certainly for the company, that he came to San Francisco. The English, in general, know very well how to handle choristers--musically, vocally, and as personalities. You must never forget that a chorus consists of personalities, and to amalgamate them, and bring out the best in them, and keep their interest, is all-important.

At the time when the entire repertoire had to be rehearsed prior to the season--because the chorus was not available in the daytime and it was always a problem during the season to get enough rehearsal time from them--it wasn't easy to keep the interest of a chorus of sixty or eighty for so many months. I used to tell them once a week, "Tonight is performance night." I let everything pass that night only to stimulate their sense of performance, and the excitement that they were able to give during those days.

That was the advantage [of their] not being professional choristers. In some opera houses you can find a very good chorus that has automatons as choristers. Well, in the San Francisco chorus--and I hope it still is so--each member was interested not only in the quality of his work or the chorus work, but the quality

of the performance. There is really artistic life in this group, and I would hope that something of this still exists.

When I come to conduct an opera and I rehearse with the chorus alone, I can get this. You must keep their interest alive; they mustn't feel, "Oh, my God, I have to sit here three hours again." They must come and enjoy.

As far as the accusation goes that you ruin voices by [having them] sing in the chorus, this is not necessarily true. I have always explained to choristers that singing with others means not to give everything that you have, but to listen to your sections and the entire group, adjust your song, and at the same time, if you find there is something that is difficult, you can try out certain things when others sing the same part. I don't believe that I ruined voices when I was chorus director. As a matter of fact, it is known that soloists came out of the chorus.

At the same time, I cannot subscribe to the fact that while someone sings in the chorus, you can take him or her out frequently to sing solo works. If they are good voices, you need them in the chorus, and if you do it, you have to pick the right moment, because you will lose them soon. That is the natural course of events, because if they have good voices they will want to become soloists eventually--most of them.

On the other hand, if I think back to the Chicago chorus--and I think we talked about the Chicago chorus of ninety-two in the forties. When I left in 1943, twenty-nine left for the Met with me. Not to count the others who also left, but I'm afraid I disintegrated the chorus I had built up in Chicago with my departure. About twenty-nine left for the '43 fall season of the Metropolitan, and you wouldn't believe it, there are still some in the Met chorus. That means how long--forty years? No, forty-two years.

That much about chorus. Of course, it is also true that many beautiful musical parts of an opera are given to the chorus. I remember when the chorus was so good, under my immodest leadership, that they always had applause, after an aria. The public, in those days, had taken the chorus to their hearts, and the chorus deserved every bit of it. For example, the cigarette chorus in Carmen was a delightful sound.

Pfaff: How was it that Mr. Bradshaw came to your attention?

Adler: Sir, I don't know. I remember that I had difficulties getting him here because he had obligations at Glyndebourne. The people in Glyndebourne and I were always very friendly and I certainly knew

the problem of finding a good man for the chorus, so I talked to everybody I could trust and mentioned that I was looking for a new director.

It is also true that some chorus directors from here--especially Italians--went to very important positions. One of the directors was Lazorì. He became the director of the RAI in Italy, and so forth.

Pfaff: How do you spell his name?

Adler: L-A-Z-O-R-I. I really thought that the Italians might be good for the maintenance and development of the vocal standards, you know? That's why I brought them. But then a maestro del coro has a very important position in the Italian operatic life. I wanted to give them this.

In the work with the chorus, I tried to give all conductors time to work with the chorus in the chorus room. Obviously, with having only evenings at their disposal, and with the necessity to sell more and more performances, the free evenings became sparse. I couldn't always schedule what I wanted to schedule.

Adriana Lecouvreur

Pfaff: The 1977 season opened with a production of Adriana Lecouvreur, which was the first time, I believe, the company had done that opera. It was also the debut of Gianandrea Gavazzeni. Can you tell me what you recall of that production?

Adler: Well, Maestro Gavazzeni is a very distinguished Italian conductor who still is conducting. As a matter of fact, I read very recently a review about his conducting a symphony concert in Vienna with the Vienna Symphony Orchestra which had excellent write-ups. The conclusion was: "Old Maestro spoke so much for them that it was too bad one didn't hear him more often."

That was also my feeling. You felt very secure with Gavazzeni. He was a man of great skill and knowledge.

Adriana Lecouvreur is a work that requires this, because the orchestra very frequently has very short, fast passages. To connect those and at the same time to really use the skill of each musician is imperative. Who sang Adriana that year?

Pfaff: That was Renata Scotto.

Adler: Oh, yes. Now, Scotto, who previously was a master Butterfly, was quite overwhelming, overpowering, in her interpretation and also vocally, as Adriana. Wasn't [Elena] Obraztsova in this?

Pfaff: Yes.

Adler: The part of the Princess is sometimes not cast strongly enough, and Obraztsova was already in appearance a dominating figure. I think the scenes between her and Adriana will be remembered for a long time.

There was [Giacomo] Aragall, but who was Michonnet? I have forgotten now. So that is a sign, perhaps, that it wasn't all that it could have been.

Pfaff: [Looking up the part] Oh, Giuseppe Taddei.

Adler: Taddei! [laughs] Well, I tell you, Taddei, of course, is always a remarkable artist and interpreter. But Taddei had a period when he was a little on the way down. After that, he went up again, and I have the greatest admiration and affection for him. The fact that I didn't remember his Michonnet--perhaps he did something in that interpretation that somehow wasn't quite what I'd hoped for. But I remember many other roles, a great variety, which he did for us outstandingly.

He is still singing, and is one of the favorites at the Vienna Opera, I read. He sings still all the dramatic parts.

Pfaff: It was, as I remember it, a very polished performance on his part. I think he must have been on the way back up.

Adler: Maybe so. I don't know what made me forget this. I remember very strongly Obraztsova and Scotto and Aragall.

I have a personal little thing about Adriana. I was supposed to conduct it in France last year. I had never learned this opera because I didn't like it particularly. Naturally I had to learn it and I had a partitura sent from Paris. I spent a lot of time on it, and two days before I was to leave for France, I came back from Washington and found that my entire family had the flu. I caught it.

So I called the doctor, because the family was supposed to go with me. We all had high fevers, and he said to me, "In that condition you don't want to travel eighteen hours to France." And I said, "Yes, certainly." He said, "No, you won't."

So I had to cancel. And then, while I flew back from Washington, I went slowly through the entire partitura, when I arrived in San Francisco, I said, "You did it." I really had learned it. That was hard, because I had a certain reluctance about the score. The arias are beautiful, some of the duets, but there is a lot of it which, at that time at least, I thought was not what it ought to be.

Pfaff: When you knew it, did your affection for it grow?

Adler: Well, you know, when you spend hours and hours on a score you finally have got to like it. You don't have affection, necessarily, but you start liking it, in a certain sense. You see certain things that can be done, and so forth.

The singer who was supposed to be Adriana [in France] was Raina Kabaiwanska, of whom I think very highly, and I understand that Adriana is one of her best roles. Well, she very sweetly wrote me a letter--I had not heard from her for a while--telling me how much she regretted that I couldn't come, because she had been looking forward to working with me, as I had been looking forward to working with her. From all reports, she really tried, and the performance was very successful.

Pfaff: Was this in Marseilles?

Adler: It was in Marseilles.

Pfaff: My feeling about the score is that for all its shortcomings, there is a very skillful handling of mood along the way, particularly in the last act.

Adler: Well, the last act is certainly shorter and better. I have the impression--and obviously I haven't bothered much with the score since then--that it's talkative. And not very good talk, at times. The arias are effective, but I think that the structure and construction of the score is not everything one desires.

Idomeneo

Pfaff: I don't know if you would call this taking a risk, but you did an unusual Mozart that year when you did the Idomeneo in a production borrowed from Cologne. What was your feeling about Idomeneo?

Adler: Idomeneo has a great deal of outstanding music. I'm not quite sure that it is altogether the best theater piece, but the Ponnelle

production in Cologne which I went to see was most impressive, so I decided I wanted to try it.

I think I was right. It is true that Idomeneo usually doesn't remain in the repertoire. But it comes back at odd times at opera festivals. I don't know how many times it has been done in Salzburg now; that is also a Ponnelle production, I believe. Anyhow, I am very glad that I did it. I think a major opera company, at one time or the other, should do Idomeneo.

When we did it Ponnelle had, again, a combination of stroke of genius and sometimes exaggeration. I didn't quite agree [with] the way he handled Elektra, but then we have talked a lot about how much one can interfere with the stage director, and Ponnelle was certainly someone who at least accepted discussion with me about things I didn't like.

You know, when you are honest, you must be a little careful when you argue or dispute certain things in operas you haven't done much. With Idomeneo not being in the usual repertoire, it was not an opera in which I had been involved before. Something you know very well, you can be convinced it ought to be so and so, except you know my belief--my very credo--that you can reach your artistic and other goals in different ways. There isn't one way to do things, there are many ways. And who tells me that Ponnelle is right and I am wrong, or that he's wrong and I'm right? And with everybody else it's the same.

In a long life, you are sure that certain things you see and hear are wrong artistically. But when it comes to a man like Ponnelle, you must be careful not to try to talk him out of something that he may be able to pull off.

Pfaff: Wasn't this one of the productions that came from what you called his "gray period"?

Adler: Yes.

Pfaff: Did you endorse it?

Adler: I will tell you something. In Idomeneo, you have stone, a great deal of it, [so] naturally you take gray gladly. I wasn't quite sure, though, and I discussed it with him, if it was necessary to do Così fan tutte in gray. It's very elegant, and it has the advantage that it brings out the actions and the costumes extremely well. But I wasn't quite sure if it brought out Mozart's music, which certainly is not gray, if you want to associate music with color.

Katya Kabanova

Pfaff: There was also an important new production by Günther Schneider-Siemssen of Katya Kabanova that featured a number of important debuts, including Elisabeth Söderström and Rafael Kubelik, both.

Adler: Well, I had seen [Josef] Svoboda productions of Katya Kabanova which were very good, [and then] Schneider-Siemssen did a Vienna production which I did not like particularly. But Schneider-Siemssen had a command of projection which is unique. When he uses projections, he does not have projections which replace scenery. His projections have functions of lighting, of mood, of design, rather than scenic functions, and I like this, and I think he did a magnificent job.

I am always afraid not to do Janacek in Czech. But again, people were not ready to hear this in Czech at that time, so we did it in English.

Söderström, one of the greatest artists I had the pleasure to encounter, did an excellent job. But the whole thing was trying to do justice to a masterwork, which is not a masterwork per se. One has to help it, I think. Kubelik certainly knows his metier as well as Janacek, and has a first-rate way of interpreting this composer, I think. We tried to avoid breaks, and Kubelik had certain ideas about the interludes, because there are interludes which are important, and others are less important. I don't remember the details now, but we talked a lot about where one could stop and wait a moment, and where it was absolutely essential to finish the scene changes.

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Adler: I enjoyed working with Mr. Kubelik very much. He wasn't too well, but that production of Katya was scenically and musically a very good one, and one I enjoyed being plagued with. It's a very difficult work.

Janacek is not easy for an orchestra, especially if they don't play much of his music. But it's worthwhile.

Pfaff: Well, you certainly got your audience to believe in it.

Adler: I believe that. The audience started liking it more and more.

Pfaff: Wasn't one of the things that made it possible for you to do it in English with Söderström her enormous command of languages in general?

Adler: Yes, and also a willingness to learn it in English. Someone else who would have enough command of the English language to sing internationally wouldn't want to learn it in English, because they cannot use it anywhere else. It is a major effort to learn a major part in any language.

We talked the other day about it, when I sent a Russian coach to Silja in Hamburg for--what was she going to sing?--Katerina. She did it. At first she was kind of worried that she couldn't do it well, but then she did it fine.

Pfaff: She is a native German, is she not?

Adler: No, I don't think so. I'm not sure if she is from Lithuania or Finland. I'm not quite sure, but she lived in Germany most of her life [Silja is Berlin-born].

Das Rheingold

Pfaff: That year you also brought back Das Rheingold, but there were some important changes. One was the conductor; you had Heinrich Hollreiser making his company debut.

Adler: Yes. Hollreiser was a real pro, and when you animate Mr. Hollreiser he can be very good. Again, he is a man who knows his job.

Musicians admire a conductor who is familiar with the needs of an artist, which Mr. Hollreiser certainly is. Who was Wotan?

Pfaff: Ferdinand Nentwig.

Adler: Nentwig was in his very early days then, and had been singing a lot all over the world, including the Metropolitan. He was a man whom I liked. I think he had been, maybe, in another profession before he became a singer, because he had a special intelligence--which doesn't mean necessarily that all singers must be not intelligent. But he was quite skillful. Who was Loge?

Pfaff: I think that was William Lewis. Oh, no, [Ragnar] Ulfung.

Adler: That's right. Ragnar was a dear friend of mine, and of him I think very highly. I think he had difficulties with Loge. He was also

not well costumed, as is usually the case with Loge. You know, nowadays Loge is frequently sung by what we call a character tenor. And I think that was the problem. Ulfung could be a character tenor, but he could also be a heldentenor.

When I grew up in Vienna, Loge was almost exclusively done by heldentenors. Men who sang Siegmund or Siegfried would also sing Loge. Perhaps I have a struggle with the gentlemen who sing Loge nowadays, because it's not what I grew up with, and sometimes it's difficult to change one's expectations.

Pfaff: Andrew Porter made that very point when he reviewed the new Ring here in the first two installments. It was what he didn't like, besides the costuming. What he didn't like about Bill Lewis was that it wasn't a heroic voice. He said the same thing, that he was brought up on heldentenors as Loge.

Adler: When you sing the part of Loge you need an enormous intelligence, which was the case [with singers] in earlier days.

An Earlier Lohengrin: Erik Schmedes

Adler: I remember the first Loge I knew was a Danish tenor, Erik Schmedes. He was a heldentenor in Vienna. He was a very tall man and an excellent actor. He played for years and sang all the Wagnerian roles; he sang also Pagliacci, but mainly the Ring roles. He was my first Lohengrin in 1915, believe it or not, and later on, about eight years later, I played in opera classes he gave at the Conservatory.

I learned an interesting thing from him: that when one singer does one thing, it goes, but when another does it, it doesn't necessarily go. Let's talk, for instance, about Lohengrin. In the melody from the last act--[singing]--I've never forgotten how Schmedes did it; he lifted the crown--of course Lohengrin has no crown--but it was so colossal and incredible that it was right. And then when this poor young singer who was trying to learn Lohengrin did it, it was absolutely funny.

Schmedes tried to explain to him his feelings, what he thought, the gymnastic side of the movement, everything. It still didn't work, because Schmedes was rather tall and enormously gifted, and this little guy just couldn't do it.

A good teacher will not teach a singer to stick with something that the good singer and good interpreter is able to do if he sees

that the singer is not right for it. He will try to come up with something else. Which means that Mr. Schmedes, who was a fabulous artist, was perhaps not the most flexible teacher.

I remember he was at the end of his singing career during those days, but he still liked to sing. When he taught the first Die Walküre, he would sing and act through the entire first act.

Pfaff: Rheingold, in 1977, certainly had a pretty Fricka, Hanna Schwarz in her American debut.

Adler: Yes, she is an enormously attractive lady, with a very beautiful voice. In my opinion Hanna at her best is something in the line of Maria Olczewska when I grew up. Olczewska sang all the Italian roles, Strauss and so on. I remember with pleasure her Wagnerian interpretations, and I see and meet her in Europe now, when I go there. She is singing there more than she is singing here now. I thought that her Fricka was very, very good. Who else was in this?

Pfaff: It was an impressive cast. It was Carol Todd and Patricia Payne. And it says here it was Hager directing. That's Chita Hager, right?

Adler: In 1977, it must have been.

Aida

Pfaff: The Aida that year was the Met production--

Adler: Well, we've talked about it.

Pfaff: Yes, we just haven't talked about two of the debuts that came with it. One of them was the company debut of Fiorenza Cossotto, and the other one was Eva Marton.

Adler: Fiorenza I have known since she was a little girl hanging around in the offices of Liduino in Milan, the main agent of artists of the world in those days. Fiorenza was hanging around there all the time. She tells a story that she finally auditioned for me when she was much too young for an international career those days--or any career, as a matter of fact.

Now, Cossotto has a very strong personality, and not an easy personality, necessarily. Somehow she insisted that I engage her husband at the same time.

Pfaff: Who was her husband then?

Adler: I even gave him Ferrando in Trovatore once, which I shouldn't have done. A very nice and knowledgeable man, but the voice--

Pfaff: An Italian?

Adler: Yes.

Pfaff: Was it Ivo Vinco?

Adler: Yes, Vinco. I don't think he was Italian, was he? I'm not sure. but it was Vinco. I objected to her making a condition that I had to have him, and so on, but it was always difficult with her. I was very glad when we overcame difficulties and she finally sang, because she was not an easy customer. She also made difficulties with all the stage directors and conductors.

But hers was an amazing comeback, because she had a period where she was much less good than she is now. There's no doubt that she's ambitious, and a careful artist. I remember hearing her Carmen in Venice. She was very proud of it, but it was a little Italianate, you know. Very much on the heavy side.

She hasn't been too often in San Francisco, I think, since coming back.

Pfaff: It's been very seldom, actually. I think only one more time, and I think it was Azucena.

Adler: Yes, it was one of the cases where I gave in to her.

Pfaff: And Marton?

Adler: Eva Marton, a Hungarian soprano, is, in my estimation, a very excellent artist and singer. I remember with pleasure conducting Tosca with her in Manila. We worked for this, because we had fun working. We both remember with pleasure and have remained good friends. Lately, we met in the dining room in Salzburg, where I was with my family and she was with friends. In Verona, when I was leaving one morning, who sits behind me at breakfast but Eva Marton, alone. She had just arrived. I think she sang Tosca there the same night.

She is a very conscientious artist, who, I think, can sing German repertoire as well as it can be done. She lives in Hamburg, but, of course, sings internationally now. But at that time, she

was one of the artists I had heard and thought, "Get hold of her early."

Pfaff: Yes, she must have been quite young at the time.

Adler: Yes. I'm sorry that in my day she didn't sing Turandot. I haven't heard it yet, but I understand it's a real event when she does it.

Pfaff: So I understand. I know it's out on video, but I haven't seen it.

Adler: It's out on video? Well, I'll tell you something. Turandot on video. [sighs] With most operas, and certainly Turandot, you need space, and if there's one thing that video does not provide. If you want to look at the muscles of the singers opening their mouths that is one thing, or if you want an extremely condensed picture of a grandiose scene, well, okay. But I personally don't think it is an ideal way of seeing or listening to an opera. Especially not a grand opera of this kind.

Turandot

Pfaff: I'm interested in your thinking about the role of Turandot, since we'll be coming to it in just a moment with [Montserrat] Caballé. One of the things that Rysanek told me when I spoke with her in New York (she sang it in Los Angeles with you), she said the only time she ever listened to a critic was one of the critics in Los Angeles who wrote that she gave a lovely performance but he didn't want to hear a voice as beautiful as hers in this voice-wracking role. Do you think it's a "voice-wracking" role?

Adler: Depends on what your technique is. I mean, it is a role that has range, and though it is not a very long role, it has long passages in the high register and low register, and whatnot. But Puccini knew much too much about voice [to] have written in his late years a role that would ruin voices. It is only that singers cannot sing and shouldn't sing Turandot when their voices are hurt.

I don't believe with Leonie Rysanek that it was to her harm, nor Nilsson, or Maria Nemeth, whom I heard originally in Vienna. In the original Vienna production, there were two Turandots. Jeritza was at the Met at that time, so it was Nemeth, a Hungarian soprano with incredible high notes.

Pfaff: Sorry, I don't know that name. Could you spell it?

Adler: N-E-M-E-T-H. Nemeth was an Hungarian, and she sang roles like Sulamith in Die Königin von Saba. She wasn't the best actress, but it was a voice in which the tops were overwhelming--the high C's, especially--and in Turandot, naturally.

Lotte Lehmann was not the ideal for Turandot; neither in characterization, nor vocally, because tops were not her strength. But then came Jeritza, and Mr. Jan Kiepura, a Polish tenor of that time, and that was a couple with whom Turandot really gained great life.

Pfaff: Let's go right from here to the Turandot that you did in 1977. You had a couple of good singers yourself: Caballé in her company debut and Pavarotti singing his first Calaf.

Adler: I'll tell you, that was to some degree an experiment. It was a production we brought from Cologne, and Caballé is really not the singer to work with Ponnelle. Caballé is a great artist, but she didn't have--[searching for words]--she knows it so I can say it--she didn't look [like] Turandot, necessarily. She is a lady of great intelligence and certainly knew what she wanted to do, but I don't think her voice is necessarily a Turandot voice. I think that an opera with more cantilena is better for her.

She was very much bothered, by the second or third act, by all those steps. That's why Ponnelle with his great inventions gave her two dwarfs, one on each side, to guide her through the opera.

It looked very believable, actually, although it was strictly Mr. Ponnelle's brainstorm. But that caused her a problem, I remember.

Then Pavarotti, of course, sang Calaf. He is always very nervous when he sings a role for the first time, but he had some worries about the "Nessun dorma" in that series of performances. That was unbelievable to me, because he had done the aria a lot in concert, and with me conducting. He liked it so much that he usually did it for an encore.

Pfaff: That's what you did at the Greek Theatre.

Adler: And there weren't any problems. But in that performance, somehow, it wasn't quite what was expected.

Pfaff: Did you agree with him that he had any reason to worry about it?

Adler: Yes, I think he pushed in the middle voice, which you cannot do if you want to do the passages going from the A-flat to the high A's, and so on, again and again, and sing the high B that he wished to

hold so long in the end. I think that at that time Maestro Chailly, who was very young, didn't quite understand what Pavarotti needed. He didn't help him, and that may have been one of the reasons. Also, he was then a very loud conductor. I don't think he is now.

Pfaff: Fast, too.

Adler: Yes! Well, the thing is that in an aria like "Nessun dorma," you must breathe with the singers when you conduct. I don't think that this was yet the case.

I was not entirely happy with Ping, Pang, and Pong; interpretatively and musically. I remember the first Turandot I experienced here [1953] was a production that was designed by my friend Harry Horner, whom we have talked about before. I think it was--if I'm not mistaken--Agnini who directed it, who could at his best--with little things like the Ping, Pang, Pong--do an excellent job. I remember with great admiration the way he handled the miners in the Girl of the Golden West, too, when we did it. But somehow he didn't quite succeed.

Who was Liu [in Turandot]?

Pfaff: Leona Mitchell.

Adler: Oh, Mitchell. Yes, she was perhaps too young for the San Francisco Opera at that time, but she had this beautiful voice which I nursed from the very start. It was perhaps a little early for her, and of course, Ponnelle, I remember, scared her to death. Speaking about death, she had to die falling over the prompter's box (one of his extravaganzas in that opera), and remain lying there for a while. And she was too young to do those things with gusto, you know?

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Pfaff: Can you remember, was it Caballé's idea to do Turandot with you, or did you ask her?

Adler: Sorry, I don't remember. I would think that it was my idea, that when we discussed the works that she could sing with me, I mentioned Turandot.

She has sung a very wide repertoire, which is actually not known here--Wagner, Strauss, etc., and she liked it very much. I heard Caballé in 1984 sing a recital in a church courtyard in Verona, Italy. I must say, it was one of the most perfectly executed recitals I have ever heard in every respect.

Pfaff: Do you remember how it came about that you got this production from Strasbourg? Bloomfield relates that another production was planned and something didn't work out, so you had to go shopping around for a production. You sent John Priest. Do you remember?

Adler: No. That there was something else planned?

Pfaff: Not a different opera, but another Turandot. He says that something fell through and that you had to send John Priest Turandot-shopping.

Adler: Well, not shopping. Before borrowing or renting a complicated production like Turandot, I would certainly want the technical director to examine the production, hear what he has to say about it, and tell me if it can be done, technically, on the stage of the War Memorial Opera House.

Pfaff: I remember this production really filled up the stage.

Adler: It was an enormous production. I don't remember if the measurements of the Strasbourg Opera are bigger than here, but it's a more modern house.

Pfaff: It is.

Adler: Of course; built after the war. It was one of the first opera houses built after 1945. I remember [laughs] that as always there was a lot of criticism. One important man from Cologne was asked, "What should one do at the Cologne Opera house this fall?" and he said, "Tear it down." This was very shortly after it had been finished.

Ariadne Auf Naxos

Pfaff: There was one other very important role debut that year. That was Leontyne Price singing her first Ariadne auf Naxos.

Adler: Yes. That certainly was my idea, and I think that if she had sung it more often, she really could have been the Ariadne. She didn't do it very often, and she said--from what I understand and also from her--that this was the best of all theaters, here. It is a role that should be up her alley, so to say, in every respect.

The Ariadne production was by George Jenkins. I remember that the Prologue was quite satisfactory, but the act which is the opera was never quite satisfactory. We had problems with the arrival of

Bacchus; it changed each time we performed it, and so on. Jenkins is a very intelligent and good designer, and I think some things, for instance Act II and III, were outstanding. About Acts I and IV, I had my questions and they never were resolved.

This is a very difficult opera for the orchestra. It needed repeated rehearsals to get the orchestra to really play it well. It calls for a chamber orchestra with thirty-six, thirty-seven players, but if a conductor knows how to handle that instrumentation, it can sound ravishingly full. If the ending is well handled, you don't miss the usual enormous Strauss orchestra. It sounds just as luscious and rich as his other works. Incredible. Incredible.

I like Ariadne very much. It's a very difficult opera to cast, except for the Composer. The Composer cannot lose; it is such a good role that whether you put a soprano in, or a mezzo-soprano, a better or not-so-good [singer], the Composer is a winner in that opera. I read the other day that Maria Ewing sang a Composer at the Met which was just--the people went absolutely wild. I can believe it. It is very much suited to her in every respect. Did [Christa] Ludwig sing the Composer?

Pfaff: Ludwig? No, that was Tatiana Troyanos.

Adler: I had good Composers; I had Troyanos, I had Ludwig. Again, thinking back to my golden youth, before she sang Ariadne, Lotte Lehmann was a wonderful Composer. She had the warmth that the role requires.

Pfaff: Did you by any chance hear at Salzburg the one night that Christa Ludwig sang Ariadne?

Adler: No. I remember she did it. I don't know how she did.

Pfaff: With Böhm.

Adler: Well, you see, Böhm had his favorites, and one of them was Ludwig. He was inclined to suggest that she sing everything. It is like for a number of years, for Karajan, [Gundula] Janowitz sang everything, whether it was right for her or not.

Un Ballo in Maschera

Pfaff: Let's wrap up the discussion of 1977 with the production that you loved, the new production of Un Ballo in Maschera.

Adler: Yes. That is a production that I think was prepared--first in thinking it through, talking it over, and working on the designs with the designer and the director--the way it should be. And then the rehearsals with the singers and the chorus and everything. I remember sitting in a hotel room in Munich when Sonja Frisell, who was then with La Scala, came up from Milan, and the designer, John Conklin, came from New York. For a full two days--nobody had more time, but we did work day and night--we talked the production over and argued it until it was something that satisfied us all, in general. I wasn't entirely happy with the second scene--Ulrica's house--which was placed in a way that was not advantageous from the point of view of the music. But never mind. Everything else was really wonderful.

The work with the principals at that time was a dream. It was [Katia] Ricciarelli, who was more than willing those days--and I'm not sure that Amelia is entirely her role, because it's not quite dramatic enough for her--but she was very, very good. [José] Carreras was in top form, and loved every minute of it. [Yuri] Mazurok was the one difficult point. He was a little bit of an outsider, but the way it was staged, this worked. Oscar was one of the first big roles for Kathleen Battle, and I liked this very much.

I think it was not only satisfactory, but I think we did justice to Verdi to the last, and the public enjoyed it. The public! I remember a performance where Caballé and Pavarotti sat in my box and just adored it. I wish they would have remembered this forever.

By the way, there is a funny recollection. When Pavarotti sang his first Ballo here (it was another production, with Martina Arroyo), I had Leontyne Price with me in my box. She loved it, and I went, as I always did at the end of the performance during the curtain calls, onto the stage.

When I left my box, Pavarotti was in his solo call. When I came on the stage, he still was in his solo call, and the other artists were standing there at the curtain, waiting to join him, and he just [stood there]--it was his first Ballo. So I said to Arroyo, "Go on, go out. It's okay." And she took the others by the hand and went out on the stage, and went to Pavarotti with her fingers on the side of her mouth and said, "Remember us?" Leontyne Price heard this in the box, and just almost fell over in shame.

That was a production that was staged by Faggioni and he and Pavarotti just couldn't see eye to eye. Faggioni, who was very young, should have seen this and should have tried another way--but

the two fought each other in an incredible way. And that was exactly the opposite from the Ballo we did a few years later.

You know, I always make the joke that the love duet was a love trio scene [in the Ballo of 1977], really, because I was a participant. That is, by the way, one of the most beautiful love duets I know. Maybe Otello, maybe Tristan, are in the same category.

Pfaff: Whose idea was it to put the action back in Sweden?

Adler: This was done a great deal. In Stockholm they always did it, and Ulfung, for instance, was the one who was in a famous production--I forget whose production it was--at the Stockholm Opera. It had an enormous success and traveled through Europe, and it was the Swedish version. We know, of course, that Verdi changed the setting for political reasons, so that the Swedish King became the governor of Boston, which is kind of crazy. But the music is so good that one can use the Boston version, though I think that the original one is the stronger one.

John Conklin did an excellent job with the last scene. There are two stage bands in this last scene, one is a brass band, and Verdi had excellent military bands of enormous size at his disposal, so he could get very large numbers in the brass bands for the ball. And then comes the minuet, during the duet of the King and Amelia, and I always insisted that the strings be on the stage. It is not meant this way by Verdi, but I've found that when you have the band backstage and the strings on the stage, it is more effective.

Conklin felt it wouldn't be a good idea (with my apologies to the musicians) to see them on the stage, just as I would rather have the Don Giovanni orchestra backstage--simply not seen.

But the way Conklin did it was both acoustically and dramatically good. The fact that we started with the meeting in Munich between Sonja Frisell and John Conklin and myself made it possible to see what the needs were. And so there it was; it was discussed from the very beginning.

Designer John Conklin

Pfaff: What kind of designer was Conklin? He was obviously fairly young when you encountered him, and it's a very challenging piece, Ballo.

Adler: It is. You know, he's a romantic designer, somehow. He has, of course, done and tried all the other approaches--didn't he do the Werther for me later on? I think so, and it was not quite what I had hoped for. If it is not Conklin, then my apologies to Conklin--

Pfaff: [Looking it up] It was Steven Rubin, 1975.

Adler: My apologies to Conklin. You see, that was a situation where the production was not discussed among everybody. Let's not mention names, but I was in Europe, and a lot of discussion had to be via intercontinental telephone, and you don't really succeed this way. What came out was not quite what I hoped for.

When I listen to myself speak, I hear too often, "It wasn't what I hoped for." Maybe if you read this too often, it will sound as if my efforts, production-wise, were on the negative side, but I don't think this was really the case. It is only that I am very sincere to myself, and when I don't quite get what I want, then I think if we would have had other conditions maybe it would have been better.

Pfaff: I think it's really the attitude of a perfectionist. And you're in no position to deny being a perfectionist.

Adler: No, I don't deny this. I think it's troublesome, but good.

Pfaff: The reason I asked about Conklin was that it's not clear to me how much he's an idea man, or if he has to be fed an idea, and then he can execute it.

Adler: I'm not quite sure. I haven't worked with him for too many years, and he probably has changed a lot. He and I--there was no inhibition to say what we thought, on his part or on my part. So I don't know.

He didn't mind when Sonja Frisell was very direct in what she said. What he didn't like, he would contradict very calmly. It was the same with us; we understood each other and I liked to work with him.

The 1978 SeasonLohengrin

Pfaff: Let me go to the 1978 season now. Why don't we go directly to the Lohengrin, because it makes a kind of contrast. I know you had your cast problems again with Lohengrin.

Adler: I had not only cast problems, I had also production problems. Beni Montresor, who was a great big, brilliant artist, approached Lohengrin in a way which was very, very interesting, but I had doubts about it, having expected something different from him. Certainly he had problems with the technical people, and the technical director didn't think that what he wanted to do would have the effect he wanted, and [thought] he should not attempt it. So nobody was too happy with the production.

Pfaff: What did you think about the use of so many colors?

Adler: Well, exactly. That I didn't expect. It was a strange idea, especially the slightly purple-pinkish or pinkish-purple, as you wish. The thinking was interesting, but he was told at the very early stages that it was unlikely that one could give him the effects he wanted. And that was true.

I do not want to accuse anybody, but when the technical [staff] says such a thing to start with, very frequently they don't overcome the problem. They see it from the beginning, and they work with it, and certainly I heard from the very first moment how "that won't work."

What sticks in my mind from this production is my work with Janis Martin on her first Ortrud. It was really, really a pleasure how she tried her very best to do this role. I told her that I had heard the best Ortrud, although I'd heard many Ortruds in Europe, by Astrid Varnay. And the reason was that she used the Wagner text in a magnificent way with the voice, and her phrasing and expression was outstanding.

Janis tried to do it in a similar way, and I understand that she has done a lot of Ortruds in the meantime in many big opera houses with great success. Janis is one who came out of the chorus.

Pfaff: Really?

Adler: Oh, yes. A girl from Sacramento.

Pfaff: I knew she was from Sacramento, but I didn't know she was a chorister.

Adler: I'm pretty sure she was in the chorus and I took her out of the chorus. I don't think I am doing her wrong. I don't think she was long in the chorus.

Pfaff: It's an unbelievable voice.

Adler: The problem was that Anne Evans, the Elsa, a very talented woman from England, was not well. She had auditioned for me, and I auditioned Mozart. I noticed that she had sung Strauss and Wagner in Scotland and she had worked with a well-known stage director, Harry Kupfer, who recommended her highly. Said she did an outstanding Chrysothemis and he thought that Elsa would be very good for her.

Well, when she came she wasn't well, and didn't recover the entire time. As a matter of fact, she went from here to Portland, where she was supposed to sing Senta, but she got so sick she didn't even sing a performance.

But just now I heard she sang something outstandingly. I thought very highly of her, but with the Lohengrin, I had tough luck.

Pfaff: Who was supposed to sing Lohengrin?

Adler: Mr. Rene Kollo. Mr. Kollo reported sick, but he had a yacht and he preferred to sail the seas, and didn't come. Lohengrin was meant for him, which was certainly a good idea.

And then my dear friend Raoul Jobin, who was highly recommended, came, but let's say it didn't work and leave it at that. And he was sick on top of it. I think he must have had problems at all times. He was an excellent artist, and I remember his Don José here was great. I think he sang also Samson, if I am not mistaken [1949]. He sang other roles very well. But that just didn't work.

Pfaff: Wasn't he rather old at the time?

Adler: No; oh, no.

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Adler: I noticed already at rehearsals that it might not work. And there was a young tenor, William Neill, who covered him. And if he

hadn't been too young, he could have done a very good Lohengrin when he was asked to replace Jobin, but he was too young. He didn't understand how to do it. It had success, actually, but it was one of the things one gladly does not remember, that Lohengrin.

Pfaff: Wasn't it Guy Chauvet that you finally ended up with, though?

Adler: Did I say Jobin? I'm sorry, now I realize, it was Guy Chauvet. I'm very sorry, but the roles that I mentioned were both Jobin and Chauvet.

Pfaff: Right, but Jobin was never part of this production. He would have been very old.

Adler: Subconsciously I thought of Jobin because his son sang here once [Pelléas, 1965].

Pfaff: Really?

Adler: Don't you remember that? His son was very effective, very youthful. He had one role that he sang all over, and that was Danilo in The Merry Widow. Mansouri had talked about him, and so on.

I don't think that Telramund was the right role for [Raimund] Herincx, either, in a big house like ours. I liked Allan Monk. His Herald was very good. Who was the King, Gwynne Howell?

Pfaff: Yes, I think it was Howell.

Adler: Howell is an excellent artist. I think for the King I prefer a more robust type of bass, but then, he was good, a good artist. It was fairly early in his career, and he had sung mostly in Covent Garden, which is a much smaller house.

Pfaff: Did Paolo Peloso make his debut that season? It was around that time that he started working with you.

Adler: He was an amusing, fast guy, but I don't remember many details of his music-making, frankly. He was one of those upcoming, young Italian maestri, you know? One wanted to grab him early.¹

¹Peloso first conducted Simon Boccanegra for San Francisco Opera in 1975.

Tosca and Magda Olivero

Pfaff: This was also the year that you had three Toscas: Caballé, Gwyneth Jones, and then the woman I wanted to ask you about, Magda Olivero.

Adler: Well, Magda Olivero is one of the great artists in opera history. I think that I was lucky that she came at that time of her life, and did not only La Voix Humaine [1979], but also Tosca, which was a sensational success. I don't think that all her vocal performance was quite even, but, as a whole, she was a grand, great singer of the old days. It was really fabulous.

I must say, I give credit--where I can give credit--to my successor, who was the one who suggested I should try this.

Pfaff: Really? I know she had been singing a little bit in New York at that time. She did a recital, I think, that everybody noticed.

Adler: I think so, but he was a friend of hers, and he had talked to me about Magda quite a lot. He was the one who said I should try it. I'm not sure that he suggested La Voix Humaine, but I definitely remember that he said she was such a fabulous Tosca, I should try her.

Pfaff: Had you heard her at any earlier stage, in that very long career of hers?

Adler: No, I had not.

Pfaff: What about La Voix Humaine, while we're there. I was so impressed: she seemed like a young woman on the stage.

Adler: Absolutely. That's what a great artist can do. You know, I had never seen an opera performance of La Voix Humaine. I knew the score, I had heard it on the radio and in concert, but I had never seen it performed. I think it went very well.

Pfaff: It was very powerful, I thought. I still remember that neon sign out the window going off and on.

Adler: Yes. We did La Voix Humaine, Il Prigioniero and Gianni Schicchi. That is a very long evening. The reason for the good box office was that the people, by that time, didn't mind sitting in the theater longer when they had good performances. I personally don't like very long evenings, but, seemingly, I was right to give it to the public.

Pfaff: If you don't like long evenings, why do you keep doing the Tristans and the Lohengrins?

Adler: Well, Lohengrin actually isn't so long. It seems only long when it's not a very good performance, which is frequently the case.

It was Whitsuntide, I told you about when my father had been drafted in the First World War, and my mother and I saw him off at the station where he took the train. He was stationed an hour or so from Vienna, and after seeing him off, we went to the opera and heard Lohengrin. It was one of the reasons that I became hooked on opera.

In the cast were Jeritza as Elsa; Anna Bahr-Mildenburg, a famous mezzo-soprano and the wife of a famous writer and poet; Erik Schmedes, whom we discussed earlier; Herman Weidemann, a famous Wagnerian baritone; and Richard Mayr. Franz Schalk was the conductor. So, you see, those are memories. It was during 1916; the War started in '14. But those things you don't forget.

Those productions were completely old-fashioned, with a swan, with feathers, you know, and, God, did we love it! The wiggling boat--I know a famous joke when Slezak missed his entrance, he said, "I'll take the next swan." It's like, "I'll get the next train," you know? [laughs]

La Bohème

Pfaff: This was the year that you had a new Bohème production with Ponnelle.

Adler: Yes, well, that was also a Cologne production. I'd heard about it, and then I sent someone to look at it. An incredible production. Of course, there are problems if you want an entirely realistic Bohème. The second and third acts in our Jenkins Bohème were not realistic at first, and we tried to change this repeatedly; we tried to put the roof up, and it didn't work.

But Ponnelle had an acting area in the center of the square, surrounded by Parisian houses, and the houses stayed throughout, and give a Parisian feeling to it.

Pfaff: In all four acts?

Adler: Yes. Of course, Ponnelle can do so much with lighting, and people who like modern, or different, approaches just raved about it--including me. I liked it very much.

Pfaff: It was also the company debut of Ileana Cotrubas.

Adler: Cotrubas and Carreras.

Pfaff: Or was it Aragall?

Adler: Aragall, sorry. Funny, I had those two guys here so frequently, and I have heard them in the same roles. They sing many of the same roles. Actually, in Munich it is the same situation. Aragall and Carreras sing the same roles in the same productions very frequently, and I have heard them both in Bohème there. And Carreras in the Zeffirelli Bohème in Vienna.

Pfaff: Were you pleased with Mimi and Rodolfo?

Adler: Oh, yes. Cotrubas is so sensitive that one has to be very careful with her in a large hall. But she can put it over, and if she wants to, she does. She's a rather capricious lady who doesn't get along with everybody, but with me she got along very well. What I usually did when I had people who are [difficult], I'd spend a little time with them before performances and during intermissions. I tried--without their noticing, you know--to stimulate their artistic ambition.

Pfaff: Was she particularly nervous?

Adler: She was a nervous girl, and she is capricious, somehow. But as I've said so often, we sell the nerves of the artists.

Pfaff: We sell the nerves of the artists?

Adler: Yes, we certainly do. The more nervous an artist is, the better we can use their nervous systems to better the performances we do. If they are artists. I'm not talking about singers, now; that's another thing. But you need both.

Billy Budd

Pfaff: This was the same year you tried another Britten opera, Billy Budd, also with great success.

Adler: I think that Billy Budd was a good production. It was possible to knit all those characters together, and it worked. We had also a cast change, if I remember rightly, the bass.

Pfaff: That's right.

Adler: Forbes Robertson came at the last minute, but he was an experienced man in this role, and he was very good.

It is sometimes difficult to put over an opera where you have no female voices--or no women; let's call a spade a spade. But I think, as I have said before, Britten is a remarkable composer of great distinction, great eloquence. I think that's actually putting it right for Britten: distinction and eloquence.

Fidelio

Pfaff: This was also the year of Fidelio, that featured other new people: Sheri Greenawald and Spas Wenkoff.

Adler: Greenawald, of course, I knew. I think she was a very good Marzelline. If you cast her right, she can do excellent performances. She's a good artist.

Spas Wenkoff was rather in the beginning of his career, you know. He has made a big career now, because there are few real Wagnerian tenors, and he is one. Of course, I worked with Wenkoff in Tristan when I conducted it, and he had Jones as a partner, who was very insecure. He was deadly secure; he's a great musician. He is a very intelligent man who had another profession. I don't know what it was.

Pfaff: Before he became a singer?

Adler: Yes. And entirely dependable. I can't remember, not only in Tristan but in any opera I heard him in, any wrong entrances or mental lapses or whatnot. He needs a lot of time to warm up, and sometimes he succeeds, but not always. I have heard very good reports about him lately, but I don't know if Florestan is his role.

I remember that Franz Schalk, the director of the opera in Vienna and a man whom I admired very much for his ideas and his conducting too, used Alfred Piccaver [as Florestan]. He was a really lyric tenor; he would sing Massenet otherwise, or Rigoletto or Ballo on the lyric side. He used him for Florestan.

He also sang some Lohengrins which, in parts, were wonderful. But then would come the moment when Wagner wrote for a dramatic tenor. And then you miss something, you know? He [Wenkoff] was a dramatic tenor, but if I remember rightly, he had also problems with the language--at that time we did Fidelio in German. Under Merola it was done in English, and I remember that was a very big issue.

Pfaff: There were two other participants in that production that are not known to me particularly. One was Wich.

Adler: Gunther Wich, yes. He was a longtime conductor in Dusseldorf, and I think before that in Mannheim. One of those solid German Kapellmeisters who did their job. Wich conducted many years in Germany, but that doesn't mean that he'll have success here. I don't think it was a failure, if I remember right, but I don't think it was a special success.

Pfaff: The director was Federik Mirdita, which is a name I also don't know.

Adler: Mirdita is an Austrian who is very highly regarded in Europe. Here he was terribly hampered in his work with the chorus--which is very important in Fidelio, of course--by his lack of English.

There are people such as Hager--his first opera was Bohème--who overcame the lack of English and weren't inhibited, and just put it over. He was so good talking to the chorus that they exploded with an ovation at the end of the last scene during the rehearsal.

Mirdita was hesitant; couldn't express himself. He is a man who is very highly regarded in Europe and it was a very good production. As a matter of fact, if I am not mistaken, he is directing now at the Salzburg Festival. Nice guy. I remember him well.

Pfaff: Do you want to go on to 1979 or do you want to stop?

Adler: No, I think we should stop.

XV HIGHLIGHTS OF 1979

[Interview 16: May 31, 1985] ##

A Broken Contract: Carlos Kleiber, 1978

Adler: I knew Carlos Kleiber from Munich quite well, and had asked him all the time to come to San Francisco. And finally I asked him for the 1978 Otello of Ponnelle. Was it Margaret Price? No, Ricciarelli. Anyway, he was very pleased.

I remember we met in London, and sat at the Savoy Grill and ate lunch there. Eva Wagner, who was in Munich at that time with Unitel, was also there--one of the Wagner family, and a very charming, beautiful lady, who is now with Covent Garden. We discussed everything and settled the contract.

To my recollection, Mr. Kleiber signed this contract. However, in February he wrote me a letter that on September--I think it was the seventeenth--he had to take one of his sons to the dentist, and therefore he couldn't honor the contract. That was an absolutely unique case, and only Kleiber can do such things. One is so taken aback--you are furious, of course--but you cannot be mad at him. What can you do if someone says, in February, that on September seventeenth I have to take my son to the dentist?

So, when I saw him in Munich in the spring, he stood there rather sheepishly, and looked at me, and--without saying hello--he said, "Are you going to sue me?"

I said, "Mr. Kleiber, I have time to sue you. Just wait a year." So he was always wondering, I heard from Munich people, would I sue him? But I did not.

So then came [Giuseppe] Patané. And of course, Patané, when he is disciplined, is an outstanding conductor. His memory is a real, honest-to-goodness memory, and he knows how to handle the orchestra not only musically, but also as individuals--or at least

he did at that time. Later on in Vienna, he didn't finish a performance because he had a difference with a horn player. He walked out and the concertmaster finished the performance.

He is one of those crazy guys. I saw him in Verona last summer, where he is the principal conductor at the Arena, I think. He was to conduct there with the Budapest Philharmonic Symphony, or whatever it's called, and that was the one thing that was rained out. Those poor fellows had come all the way but couldn't play the concert. He was heartbroken.

He is now the regular conductor for the Italian opera in Munich. There were three Otellos which he conducted, and the first one nobody was happy with, because it had been without rehearsal. This is a system to which I, for one, cannot subscribe.

Pfaff: How did this come about?

Performing Without Rehearsals

Adler: Time. Planning, perhaps. And money.

Someone asked me the other day if I had ever conducted anything without rehearsal. I must have done it in my young days. When I took over operas from other conductors, I didn't always have orchestra rehearsals. But I had, somehow, participated in rehearsals at least, and didn't come in cold.

Did we talk about the Kienzl opera at the Volksoper in Vienna? The conductor put his baton through his left hand in the first performance and couldn't conduct, and I was asked to conduct from the second performance on. I really didn't know the opera, and I had not participated in rehearsals.

So Tommy Fleisher, the late translator (he was with City Opera here, and also I think he was at the Met at some time), who was my assistant at the Volksoper in Vienna, came and he played the score for me all night, and brought to my attention what the conductor had done in the first performance.

Pfaff: What was the name of this opera at the Volksoper?

Adler: Der Kuhreigen. The composer's name was Wilhelm Kienzl. [He was] an Austrian, and he wrote several operas: a more popular one was Der Evangelimann (which I think I mentioned in connection when we

talked about big tenors, Erik Schmedes, Richard Tauber, and so on. They all loved to sing this role.)

I will never forget this performance. It went quite well, with a strange tenor, a guest tenor whom I met after the first act only because he came so late--that happened twice to me. So just in passing, on my way to the pit, I said hello. And then in the third act, I was so tired that my concentration got weaker, and so it didn't go so well. Also, probably, when my assistant played it for me, it was probably in the wee hours and I couldn't concentrate.

Once there was a Lehár operetta which I conducted without rehearsal, and that was more amusing. It was at the end of the season in Kaiserslauten, and I was supposed to conduct Così fan tutte that night, but two people in the cast were sick and we couldn't find replacements. However, there was a Lehár operetta [that season] which had not been scheduled for that night, and we were told that two of the top Frankfurt operetta people were in town who had done it. So the director decided it had to be the Lehár.

Well, the conductor who had conducted it during the season had already left; it was the last performance of the season, and only I was there to do Così. So I had to do the operetta.

We had about an hour before the performance, and we met to talk about it. First of all, it is very, very difficult in an operetta if the soprano and tenor have done many performances together, because they won't pay attention to the conductor. You have to follow them, and if you know the operetta, that's one thing. But I didn't know it well; I knew the tunes of it only.

In the second act--and obviously I conducted looking in the score--I noticed the orchestra playing something different than I had in the score. So I made some funny movements, and the concertmaster got up, and said [whispering]: "There's a cut!" Well there was no cut in the score, and I had no idea where it was going to, so I said, "What beat?" He said, "Four," so I was beating four until I found it in the score, without really conducting. Those things are terrible.

Pfaff: But you had a lot of time to get Patané to replace Kleiber, because he did give you some notice, anyway.

Adler: Yes, well, it wasn't easy. Patané is a difficult guy sometimes, a rascal, you know. But he knew I was in difficulties, and he gladly conducted the opening. Patané is a conductor who, if he doesn't get obsessive, you can rest in peace when he conducts. Which

doesn't mean that he is not quite exciting sometimes. I really have a weakness for him.

I wish he would have this--[claps to emphasize] something at the very last was missing. He should have made the biggest of careers; he was talented.

Some Thoughts About Conductors

Adler: There are a couple of conductors' names that come up. For instance, Mr. [Uwe] Mund. Mr. Mund did not have enough success that I could invite him back, yet this man is conducting regularly now at the opera in Vienna, and in Hamburg. For some reason I thought in 1980 that Don Pasquale would be up his alley. Maybe it would have been in German, but not in Italian.

You know, when I think back on Pasquale, one of the best I remember was conducted by Bruno Walter in Berlin, in the twenties.

Pfaff: That's the last thing I would have guessed.

Adler: Of course. Bruno Walter's Italian was pretty good, although it was in German, I guess, at that time. It was a famous performance. Richard Strauss liked to conduct Pasquale, you know. I thought it would be something for Mund, but I guess it was the wrong thing.

Or Mr. [Myung-Whun] Chung, for instance, who did the 1980 Butterfly. He had difficulties. He is a very talented man, but I think his wife had a difficult childbirth, or anyhow a childbirth, at the same time he was conducting, and probably his mind wasn't quite with it.

[Niksa] Bareza, now, is Yugoslavian. I heard him first conducting Trovatore in Munich, where he conducted regularly.
[Interruption as phone rings]

I was very much impressed.¹ In the intermission, I went backstage and heard several choristers talking. They said, "Who is this conductor who is conducting tonight? He is good! We like him!" They had never met the man, you see; conducting without rehearsal. But it shouldn't be. It's juggling. It's gambling and it can work, or it may not work.

¹Niksa Bareza made his U.S. debut conducting Cavalleria Rusticana and I Pagliacci in 1980.

Of course, if you are a young conductor and you have a boss who will let you conduct after him, you have to do it without rehearsals.

I conducted my first Fidelio without rehearsal, and I think my first Figaro. But always I had rehearsals with the singers and the chorus.

Pfaff: And you'd already done the Meistersinger with Toscanini at that point, hadn't you?

Adler: Yes. Well, I grew up with Meistersinger, you know. But listening is different than looking at the score--where you always find something new that you want to bring to life.

Working with Toscanini

Pfaff: When you worked with Toscanini on the Meistersinger, how much did you actually do?

Adler: Well, I was in charge of the stage and stage band. I think Erich Leinsdorf was the prompter--certainly he played rehearsals and coached singers. There's a lovely story. When Leinsdorf prepared the Masters, before Toscanini came to Salzburg, he used a condensation of the parts of the Meistersinger fight scene because it's difficult and they don't hear each other in the turmoil that always exists in a good fight scene, action-wise. You have to put some voices together so that they can hear each other.

But Toscanini came, and said, "No, no, I don't want it!"--Leinsdorf had used a condensation from the Vienna Opera--"I want the original!" So Leinsdorf had to sit down again, and what he had rehearsed for weeks he had to take apart. Which wasn't easy, because now the singers knew it very well, you know, and they made mistakes.

Then came the first rehearsal on the stage, and the whole thing collapsed. They couldn't hear each other. It was in the old Festspielhaus, which had a very shallow stage, and those who were higher up couldn't hear the folks below, so they started singing what they had rehearsed first, the Vienna condensation.

But Toscanini didn't hear that it was done, and he went through the performance. Before the last performance, Toscanini called a piano rehearsal with the singers, so Leinsdorf had to sit

down with the Masters and take it apart again, because he knew Toscanini would [notice]. And that was difficult, because they had already had several performances of it.

That was a Sunday afternoon rehearsal that he had called, and he came in late--which he never did, really--and he talked to everybody, and then he said, "Goodbye, it was nice seeing you," and never rehearsed. And someone asked him, "But Maestro, didn't you call us for a rehearsal?"

He said, "Oh, yes, but you know, when I call a rehearsal, I know you look over your part. So I don't have to rehearse." [Both laugh] But everybody was furious, because it was one of the few sunny days in Salzburg.

The Music of Gustav Mahler

Pfaff: I just heard a story the other day that Toscanini didn't conduct Mahler in his lifetime, although he knew the scores very well.

Adler: I don't know. I'll tell you something; in Salzburg he didn't, because Bruno Walter was there at the same time, and of course he did Mahler. There were others in Salzburg who did Mahler, but Toscanini to my recollection didn't.

You asked what the assistants do. I think Solti played some rehearsals, not many because Leinsdorf was the best pianist, after all. I don't remember at all what Halász did, frankly. It is interesting, come to think of it, that there were two Hungarians, Solti and Halász, as assistants. And then Leinsdorf and I were both from Vienna. Of course, Leinsdorf was close to Toscanini, because he was the assistant conductor who spoke the best Italian.

Leinsdorf, when he knew that Toscanini was there, tried to make his Italian as perfect as possible. He had been brought to Salzburg by Bruno Walter, of course, but then Toscanini absorbed him, on account of his excellent Italian.

I'm trying to think of all those who conducted the opera in Salzburg at that time. Of course, I was concentrating so much on this Meistersinger that I have no idea what else happened, except that Bruno Walter conducted the Third Mahler with the Vienna Philharmonic while I was there.

Mahler made, in my early days when I was fifteen or sixteen years old, the strongest musical impression on me. I came

completely unprepared to the Second Mahler and it was overwhelming. As the year progressed Mahler lost more and more, and I really was far away from Mahler as a composer. But that summer, I decided to try to go to all the rehearsals of Bruno Walter when he conducted--it was the Third Mahler. I'm afraid the Third Mahler was not the right piece to attract me again, even though conducted by Bruno Walter. There are some rather (I hate to use the word "vulgar") but there are passages which are on the vulgar side, probably purposely --and when Bruno Walter conducted them, they were so refined that it was different, you know. But I was very sorry I didn't come back to Mahler then.

I came back much later. It must have been '39 or '40, in Chicago. I worked with a young American singer who suddenly brought me Mahler's songs and I was completely overwhelmed. So now Mahler is much less distant to me than he was in the thirties.

In the twenties, all the great conductors conducted Mahler in Vienna. It was an emotional, musical--really an incredible--experience. But then it changed. I remember Solti conducting Mahler with the Chicago Symphony in New York a few years ago. I forget which symphony it was, the Sixth or the Ninth, but it was hard to resist. The popular symphonies; the First, Second, Third, Fourth--it's another story. There is, of course, Das Lied von der Erde, which I always adored.

I remember Bruno Walter recorded a concert performance with Kerstin Thorborg, and I believe Charlie Kullman. I was very sick, but I felt I had to go to this concert. And lo and behold, they recorded it, and if you hear someone coughing before one of those songs, it's I. [Laughs] It was my first recording.

Pfaff: [Laughing] Is that the only Mahler you've recorded?

Adler: Yes. I'm sorry to say I didn't ever have the opportunity. I've not conducted a Mahler symphony either, and I'm very sorry that I didn't have an opportunity. It would have interested me.

You see, Mahler became popular in the States at the time I was so busy at the opera. Of course, I did some movements of Mahler, but not the whole thing.

The 1979 SeasonPelléas et Mélisande: Julius Rudel ##

Adler: So let's come back to San Francisco in 1979 and talk about the conductors. Julius Rudel made his company debut with Pelléas et Mélisande in 1979. Rudel was known to me from his activities in the City Opera in New York, but I didn't know him well personally. We had met, of course, and talked. He came, and I think he did a very, very good Pelléas, and I was glad I engaged him.

He has now an international career conducting opera in Vienna, and Hamburg, and Paris; he is well known at the Met and Chicago. I certainly wish him well. He is an enormously routined conductor, but at his best he brings out in the score more than the routine sounds, which I like.

Pfaff: Had he stepped down from his directorship of City Opera when he came?

Adler: I am not sure. It is possible that it was his last year, or the year after. I am inclined to think that he had stepped down.²

With Rudel, again, at his best, you can sleep in peace; like I said about Patané. There is actually, perhaps, a certain similarity in their musical effectiveness as conductors. Of course, one is an Italian, the other one is German--or Viennese--but he loves to conduct Italian opera, too. Incidentally, I should mention here that Patané is terribly anxious to conduct German operas. I remember once he forced me to come to Berlin where he was conducting--I forget now, was it Tannhäuser or Lohengrin? He was terribly proud of it.

Naturally, he conducted often in West Berlin, and he speaks excellent German.

Pfaff: That's different from conducting excellent German, though.

Adler: Well, if the personality of a conductor is recognized, it doesn't make any difference, his nationality. Toscanini was recognized, yet I cannot say that everything he did in musical literature was right, or acceptable, in my opinion. For instance, The Magic Flute, I am sorry to say (you know how devoted I was to the

²Rudel left New York City Opera in 1979.

Maestro, and how I adored him, and what I thought of him), but I did not like his Magic Flute. And the same is true about some of the symphonies that he did. But he was so accepted, and so admired, he just couldn't do wrong for the general public. I think also, if I'm not mistaken--I have never read his press--but I think the press accepted him, without limits.

Elektra: Berislav Klobucar

Pfaff: Another conductor who made his debut the same season was Berislav Klobucar, for Elektra.

Adler: Klobucar is a man of the trade. He knows his stuff. He has a lot of expression, and he did well here, but he had a handicap: his command of the language was practically nil.

Pfaff: English?

Adler: Yes. He was afraid to stop the orchestra in rehearsals, because he couldn't express himself. He should have spoken German, because there are always enough Germans in the orchestra, you know, who understand.

When I rehearsed in Poland, I didn't know Polish, but I spoke both English and German, and there were enough people who understood, and it worked. But he was somehow afraid of stopping [during rehearsals]; I think he would have had better results if he would have been a little more courageous, and arrogant. He was a terribly nice man.

There was a story, by the way, that Loren Maazel in Vienna did not let him conduct anymore in Vienna.

Pfaff: Why didn't Maazel want him?

Adler: [Shrugs] This is a "groupie" question. I don't know why.

Girl of the Golden West: Harold Prince

Pfaff: There was an interesting production of Fanciulla from the theater of Chicago that year.

Adler: Didn't we talk about this already?

Pfaff: Just before the tape was on.

Adler: That was Harold Prince's. He had staged it in Chicago, and we borrowed the production from Chicago, but Mr. Prince came only for the last rehearsals, which I think is awful. His assistant worked on it here, but that wasn't satisfactory because there were certain things which were very different. With Prince coming from the musical theater to opera, his stagings are not quite what opera singers expect, and then if he cannot do it himself, it doesn't quite work out.

He did one thing which was very effective, but I am not sure I liked it. In the last act, instead of having all the horses come up on the stage before they tried to hang the tenor, he had lots of tracks, and he had lots of--what do you call those little carts which go in the mines?

Pfaff: I'm not sure, but I know what you mean.

Adler: Do you call them trolleys?

Pfaff: I don't think so.

Adler: Anyway, the whole stage was covered with tracks, and when Minnie came in to stop the hanging, she was riding a trolley car. Can you picture Miss Neblett coming in, cheerfully, on this trolley car--it was, for me, not a very happy experience. Of course, I don't like horses on the stage either.

When we performed The Girl of the Golden West in Sacramento, it was a small stage and there were no rehearsals there, of course. It was a San Francisco production, a one-night stand. And the stage director, Armando Agnini, had not told anybody that horses would come on the stage, so in the beginning of the last act on this mini stage--at that time they didn't have their large auditorium--came horses. Galloping. You have never seen a chorus leave the stage as fast as that male chorus! I was the chorus director then, and I used to go on the stage with them, because the beginning of the third act is really difficult, and so I tried to help them. I found myself the only chorister on the stage all of a sudden, missing all the cues!

We had done the Fanciulla before with Dorothy Kirsten and Franco Corelli [Los Angeles, 1965], which was old-fashioned, but I kind of liked it. I remember--and I must take my hat off to Armando Agnini--during the first year when I was here, '43, there was a Fanciulla with Florence Kirk, Freddie Jagel, and Bob Weede,

and [Fausto] Cleve conducting. It was in English, and the translation was by Alexander Fried. It was under Merola.

Cleve tried to tell the singers how to get the most out of the lines, and so everybody sang English with an Italian accent. It was: "I want-a to go home--to my maather." But Agnini staged the first act in a way that was unmatched later on. No stage director was able to do the same; it was really wonderful. I watched him stage it, and thought, "Oh my God, how will he get this together?" But he was so sure of his material that when he was through, everything fell into place. It's one of the operatic things I'll never forget, how Armando Agnini staged the first act of Fanciulla.

Opera and Theater

Adler: How did we get to Fanciulla? Oh, the Hal Prince production. Maybe this is the moment to talk about music theater. Of course, having started with Max Reinhardt, I very strongly believe that opera almost always must be theater. Now, a man of the theater like Harold Prince, is, of course, able to stage an opera very well if he is familiar enough with the material. He did some operas abroad which I understand were not so well received, but I didn't see them. But I share his idea that music theater, opera, and musicals must overlap--in terms of production, interpretation, and casting.

Perhaps not only the fact that I started with Max Reinhardt has something to do with it, but also the fact that I worked in Germany and in Austria. In those countries you have operetta, which in some ways was the musical theater of those days: Lehár, Leo Fall; Abraham; Johann Strauss, of course. These were performed in the same theaters, and in Germany, as well as in Vienna, there definitely was an overlap in casting and in directing.

We had the Mikado, believe it or not, on the repertoire in Germany. The conductor got sick, and I was selected to conduct [chuckles] without rehearsal. It was awful. My apologies to Monsieurs Gilbert and Sullivan. I don't know what I did in that performance.

But with the other composers--I should add Oscar Straus, and in music theater there is Kurt Weill--the overlap is very clear. Even at the Vienna Opera they performed Lehár. They performed Johann Strauss, and not only Fledermaus and Gypsy Baron, but there was also The Night in Venice, a lovely operetta.

There was one opera composer, a Viennese, who was very experienced in arranging those operettas for the State Opera. He worked also with Max Reinhardt on the Offenbach productions. It was Eric Wolfgang Korngold. He conducted Night in Venice, if I'm not mistaken, at the State Opera in Vienna. Later he did a version of Merry Widow in New York which was quite successful.

And then there were great personalities of the opera stage, like Richard Tauber, who loved to sing Lehár.

Offenbach, of course, is between musical theater and comic opera--as the different works are different. Reinhardt used opera singers to a large degree in staging Offenbach. Jarmila Novotna, a famous Czech soprano, sang for Reinhardt; Maria Reidl, the opera singer, sang for Reinhardt.

But there it was. And for me, there it is, still. There is so much discussion just now at the National Endowment for the Arts of how to handle music theater, musical theater, opera, operetta. Well, the musical theater in the States has much more material than American opera. Gradually we are getting perhaps some real American opera, you know, but certainly it isn't the most popular art form. It was the American musical theater, and it was the European opera, and we were inclined to believe--and I am not quite sure if it was right or not--that Italian opera was more popular in the United States than German opera.

Well, I looked at the history of opera in San Francisco, and I found that the traveling opera companies were mostly German which played here, around 1900 and before. Not Italian. Afterwards, naturally, when people like Fortune Gallo or the Charles Wagner opera company started to travel, they had more Italian operas on their repertoire. But the German companies were very popular. Amazing. If you read San Francisco newspapers, you would believe that San Franciscans never cared for German opera; well, hey, they always did.

Wagner is not only a composer and writer, but he is really a phenomenon of nature.

More About Girl of the Golden West

Pfaff: One of the things that interested me about Fanciulla was that not many people were doing Fanciulla at the time. Domingo and Neblett had just made a recording around the time of the Chicago production, but it had been out of the repertoire.

Adler: You see, again, I grew up with Fanciulla. In Vienna, Fanciulla was on the repertoire, because Maria Jeritza was certainly the most phenomenal Minnie you can imagine. The tenor was Alfred Piccaver, and the Sheriff was Alfred Jerger, a great actor and a strong personality. I assure you, I will never forget the ending of the second act with Jeritza and Jerger. It was a favorite opera of the Vienna repertoire.

So naturally I had it in my repertoire and my first San Francisco season, Maestro Merola put on an English Girl of the Golden West. Dorothy Kiraten liked to sing Minnie, and I remember we went once for a publicity stunt to Virginia City--or Carson City, I forget now--with her. We were filming, for publicity, her riding a horse, and the horse ran away with her down the streets of Virginia City--it wasn't so large at that time. [Chuckles] That was the publicity for The Girl of the Golden West.

Pfaff: I think it was an opera that was out of favor when it came back this time.

Adler: In English it was even worse than in Italian. It was too close, especially here. They would call for whiskey, or say that the Wells Fargo is coming, and whatnot; the people all laughed. When Bob Weede (whom I adore and greatly admire) said, "Minnie, I am mad about you," the house came down with laughter. Naturally. Not only that one shouldn't use slang in translation, but the way he said it, you know.

Freddie Jagel, as Johnson, was very short, and Florence Kirk was quite tall, so whenever there was a kind of a love scene, they tried to have Florence sitting on a chair and Freddie standing behind her. It was difficult. Of course, a couple like Corelli and Dorothy Kirsten was fine. Actually, Neblett and Domingo were another fine match-up.

I like the opera. It is not the most refined work of Puccini, and there is a problem with the last act; the duet is not very strong. I was asked once by recording publishers, would I be interested in revising the third act, using some music from [elsewhere] for the part of Rance, and possibly even making a different ending.

Well, I said I was interested, but I didn't want to commit sacrilege. Then when they checked with the Puccini family, they wouldn't go for it.

Pfaff: They checked, or you checked?

Adler: The recording firm. But it was an interesting idea. I don't think one can do such a thing, frankly, but if it could help to overcome the weaknesses of Fanciulla--

I also think the more we get away from the forty-niners, the more it might be possible to accept it. [Imitating a line]
 "Whiskey per tutti!"--always gets a laugh.

But, of course, there are places where the public laughs in operas where you don't quite know why.

Who conducted Fanciulla? Molinari probably.

Pfaff: It was Patané.

Adler: Yes? Well, he is excellent for such things. You know, the chorus is very difficult; they don't have too much, but in both the first and especially the beginning of the third act, the chorus has cues. Almost as difficult as the fight scene in Meistersinger.

Tancredi

Pfaff: In 1979, as far as I understand, you brought concert opera back to San Francisco for the first time with Tancredi.

Adler: Yes. You see, I didn't have the courage to spend a fortune on scenery for an opera like Tancredi, but at the same time, I think it is music which is worthwhile hearing, and certainly Marilyn Horne was outstanding in that role, and wanted to do it. So we decided on a stylized version of Tancredi. The singers were not wearing evening gowns and reading their roles, but they both had stylized clothing. The chorus moved little or not at all; I can't remember at the moment. But it was a very dignified and effective evening. To my horror, I heard people say and I read in some papers, "Well, why don't we have more of this?"

Of course, you can do this once in a while, but it is not the purpose of music theater. I had conducted a Don Giovanni and a Freischütz in Stern Grove in a stylized, concert version. In both operas I used--rightly or wrongly--a narrator for the recitatives.

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Adler: It worked in Don Giovanni, and I think we did it rather carefully and in a distinguished way. Although, obviously, the recitatives in Don Giovanni are so wonderful that you hate to do such a thing.

In Freischütz I found it very good, because the dialogue in Freischütz is certainly not very up-to-date, and even in Germany there are problems when you do Freischütz. I heard a performance at Covent Garden which did not catch my interest. But I was kind of happy I did the musical numbers in German, and then there were the transitions--a little bit like bridges in radio opera, in English. They surely could have been better; if you have more experience with this, you can improve. But it worked.

The singers didn't wear costumes, they wore some stylized clothes. That was fine. The chorus was on platforms, and came down only at the end. This actually worked out when we did the stage production of The St. Matthew Passion by Bach, too. The chorus was on tiers until the end, where they participated in the action.

I don't regret at all that I did it. Perhaps--who knows?--if I had been there longer maybe I would have done more extravaganzas in concert form in order to let the public hear the very beautiful music, when I felt I didn't have the money to spend on productions. Of course, there is the question of sharing, and in more recent years, more and more specialties have been produced by various opera companies.

Pfaff: What was your reason to do Le Cid in concert version in 1981?

Adler: Placido.

Pfaff: Did he ask to do it?

Adler: Yes. Look, if you have a singer who is very good in a role, and you can do it, you ought to do it. Le Cid, I think, did not work out very well. But if a very good singer and friend wishes to sing a role, and you think it would be interesting and good for the public, too, then you try to do it. Speaking of Placido, there's an opera Cyrano de Bergerac, which he was awfully anxious to do. I'm not sure it's the best opera, but I looked at the score, and you know, if singers have a good role in an opera, they will want to do it. Sometimes you even make a concession there. But the Cyrano was too complicated, and somehow we never got around to it. I think that Domingo had done it in Rome and Naples.

You see, these--I call them specialties--are good music. The fact that they aren't often done is perhaps because there are not too many stage directors who want to produce them. Did I mention

that Günther Rennert and I talked for a long time about both Semele and Saul?

Pfaff: I didn't know about Saul; you mentioned Semele once.

Adler: Schwarzkopf was also very anxious to do a Handel opera.

The Julius Caesar we did in the spring [of 1978] I didn't like. I'm sorry, the whole approach, and the whole performance didn't work out the way I hoped it would.

Pfaff: What didn't you like?

Adler: Well, first of all, Julius Caesar needs space, and the stage of the Curran Theatre was too small. The way it was used made it [look] even smaller. That is something that one has to consider; there are certain works which need space, which need size, and so forth. But everything was wrong: the casting was almost entirely wrong.

Pfaff: Even with Vaness? People said good things about Vaness.

Adler: Yes, well, she was too young and too inexperienced. Probably now she would be wonderful. But somehow she couldn't put it over. She could now.

Roberto Devereux: 1981

Pfaff: We talked a little about the production of Donizetti's Roberto Devereux. You said you put it together on next to nothing, budget-wise.

Adler: You read sometimes in writeups that "everything came out of the warehouse." Well, it was partly true, in some cases. There wasn't enough money, which was the reason for doing opera in concert form. Incidentally, I should also say that possibly some operas are better in concert form than staged. But if you use what you have in the warehouse in a skillful way, I don't see anything wrong. I think the Devereux looked quite decent. Tom Munn is a good artist, he lights well, so, why not?

A Problematic Aida: 1981

Adler: I mentioned that in the twenty-nine years I ran the San Francisco Opera, I think I was over budget only two or three times, which is a pretty good record, I daresay. That forced my working in an economic way, but if you have money, things are better.

When a friend of the San Francisco Opera gave me the money for Aida in 1981, it was possible to spend more. I am not entirely behind that production of Aida--probably no one can ever be totally behind an Aida production--there is always something wrong. But I didn't agree with some things, and the producer's opinions and wishes were so different that there was only the choice of letting him do what he wanted (as much as he could afford) or pay him off and throw him out, which I didn't want to do. [Designer Douglas Schmidt] was a respectable artist. But I didn't agree with what he wanted or with the way it was executed, and I don't think the designs were necessarily the best; they weren't very effective.

Talking about spending, the friend of the San Francisco Opera, who gave me the money for the Aida production was willing to help me when the thing was going over budget, and did, because there were such incredible ideas and demands. There was no way to stay within the budget.

Pfaff: What were the things that pushed it over?

Adler: Well, first of all, I think there was too much scenery. And what there was was very costly. I don't know if you remember those columns.

Pfaff: I remember them very well; they just glowed.

Adler: Very complicated, expensive and idle scenery, you know. Statues and whatnot. Some were very effective, I must say. But you know, I'm always worried in a production when the scenery dwarfs--unintentionally--the artists. I think that's what happened in this Aida to some degree. The over-dimensions of the scenery (unless you want to dwarf the artists, which in some cases may be true) is dangerous. But in Aida the music and what the artists have to sing is so strong that you don't want to dwarf them.

Child: 'Bye Pappi! [tape interruption]

Adler: I think that, if you don't mind, [I'll say] something about an artistic opinion of mine, about dwarfing the singers. One has to be very careful, but then naturally there are some operas where it is very difficult not to do it.

Pfaff: Turandot, in the case of that enormous Ponnelle production.

Adler: However, in Turandot, it bothered me less than in Aida.

Pfaff: Well, now in both cases you had a very difficult singer to overwhelm. Pavarotti was in both.

Adler: Who was--

Pfaff: Aida?

Adler: Well, I know that; it was Leontyne Price.

You know Margaret Price was ill before she came here. There was already, when we opened, a question whether she could make it. I remember that Leontyne Price arrived that day, and I talked to her on the telephone. I called her, just as a friend, and she must have heard already something, because she said, "You don't want me to sing tonight, do you?"

I said, "No, not now. Maybe later in the evening," as a joke. And she said, "Well, I would never let you down." And actually she stayed in her bedroom, and if Margaret, who was really not well, had had to stop, Leontyne was ready to come over and finish it.

And then--was it the second or third performance when Margaret really couldn't go on anymore?--and Leontyne sang the performance of her life. The day before or the day of the performance, we went through all her scenes, because otherwise it would have overwhelmed her and thrown her. And Leontyne is very serious; she wanted it. But the wonderful thing was that Pavarotti was so happy with Leontyne's success, that he sang differently in that performance.

He was in seventh heaven. Really, that was one of the nights I'll never forget.

Pfaff: When did you know that Margaret Price was not going to be singing? The day before, or the same day?

Adler: I saw it coming. When she really cancelled, it was the day before, I think. I'm not sure.

La Gioconda, 1979: The Company's First Telecast

Pfaff: Well, because Aida ended up being televised, this is a good time to go back and talk about the first production that you did for television, the La Gioconda in 1979. That's the only one we haven't talked about.

Adler: Gioconda is an opera which is, for me, hard to like, but which is always--if you cast it right--enormously successful. I remember in the days when Gioconda was new to me in Vienna; I never liked it especially. But each time I went to the opera to hear it, I was overwhelmed by it. Of course, it needs great singers, and a great production.

It was the Bank of America which sponsored the telecast. Tom Clausen was then in charge of Bank of America; he said those nice words, "When Kurt Adler asks you for something, you don't say 'no.'" But he said "no" to me later on!

There was some discussion among international people not so long ago, and in spite of the way it was handled, the Europeans thought that the Gioconda was really a worthwhile telecast.

I cannot be objective here, but--it's very interesting. One time my successor asked me if I wouldn't conduct the Gioconda. I don't remember what I said, but it was "if it has to be," or something like that. He said, "Well, I think it would be an excellent opera for you." I didn't do it, and I have never conducted La Gioconda.

That was an opera that was on the repertoire--as much as anything was on the repertoire. It was done here, under Maestro Merola, every few years; a very beautiful and old-fashioned production, with lots of drops. I remember with horror how the whole piazza shook in the first act when the chorus had to run around, and the gambling, and all that. But I think a good Italian, really, always has La Gioconda on his repertoire. It's a wop at heart.

Pfaff: [Laughs] This was, I believe, the first time you had Zack Brown do a production for you.

Adler: Yes. And who staged it?

Pfaff: Well, Sappington did the choreography, but I don't know if she staged it.

Adler: Sappington didn't stage it, no. Who did the choreography?

Pfaff: Margo Sappington.

Adler: I like Margo Sappington. She [slacked] a little bit; later on we didn't get out of her what we hoped we would. Who staged it?

Pfaff: It was designed by Zack Brown, and the production was by Mansouri.

Director Lotfi Mansouri

Adler: Oh, Mansouri! Well, he directed it. Mansouri I like very much; he's a charmer. He and Capobianco can charm the top prima donnas, and can get from them what they want. He's a little bit, as an artist, like Patané and Rudel: I wish he would go a little farther. As a person he is utterly charming, and not reliable, because he cannot say "no" to anybody. I have said this to him frequently, so I can say it now.

He learned opera when he was studying in Los Angeles, and he would work as a super when the San Francisco Opera was playing in Los Angeles. He was one of those fairly many who said I was his mentor. He has helped us very frequently, and done a lot for the San Francisco Opera.

He has, somehow, a rather gentle touch for everything, which can be a problem. I think it was Merry Widow he did here [1981], which was done all over the world for Joan Sutherland, and I think a little stronger hand would not have done any harm. It's the wrong term--"stronger hand"--I almost used the word "coarse." But Merry Widow is not a work that one should do in a coarse way. A little more bite to it, let's say.

I conducted for several months, in the forties, a production of The Merry Widow--what do they call it, in New York?--at the New Opera Theater, with Martha Eggerth and Jan Kiepura. That had a little more bite to it, and I kind of liked it. Of course, thanks to Kiepura there were all sorts of changes; it was a version which was not necessarily to my taste.

More About La Gioconda and the Massenet Revival

Adler: Mansouri and Zack Brown (who now designs practically everything for the Washington Opera) have a very strong sense of color, which I like. They used colors which matched Ponchielli's music very well--we are talking Gioconda again, of course, and I think the costumes were quite good.

Costumes in this kind of opera are naturally very important, and can be enormously costly. When I was in Australia last fall, the people there complained that the company was spending so much money on costumes, when they really didn't have enough money for production, scenery, and other things. Well, they told me at that time that they were able to buy material at a price which made it possible for them to build themselves costumes. Which looked like God-knows-what, but it didn't cost them too much.

That of course is fine, except the danger is that the costumes [may] outshine the music. They should match the music, but one should not forget about the music because the costumes are so glorious. Hand in hand, music and production: that's what I hoped for--practically everybody does.

The more opulent producers or designers are, the more the danger is that they will overdo a production. Some may say that if you produce an opera which is not very strong, a very strong production may help the weaker work to success, and in drama I have seen this again and again.

My mentor, Max Reinhardt, certainly did it. As a matter of fact, many people maintained that he selected weak plays in order to show off his art as a producer. This is possible, but I am worried what happens to the composition--you need enormous skill and taste to help a weak work without killing it. But I have seen this in the history of opera and theater again and again.

It is my opinion (and I must say that I learned this from Maestro Merola), that if you look at Massenet, his operatic works and also orchestra works, he is always elegant. I remember conducting Manon in Czechoslovakia, where the girl who sang Manon was very young, a Turkish girl; she was twenty-one, I think, and I'll never forget her. She was so beautiful, and a beautiful voice, but she was too young to sing Manon at that time.

But in that performance, the gambling scene was so strong, it was like a detective play. It was so exciting, and when the police came, the gambling was exciting. It can be done, if the music renders itself. I cut very little in that performance of the

gambling scene, and I really am proud of it. There was a stage director by the name of Martin Magner, who came from drama, incidentally. That was unforgettable to me.

Pfaff: I didn't say that because I am not an appreciator of Massenet's music; I was just thinking of the many Massenet operas that just haven't made it. Even the Massenet revival didn't bring them all back.

Adler: That is true. There, I am with you. But, of course, Manon, if you trim it right, is a masterpiece. I think that with Manon, if you play every bar, you kill it. But if you trim it right and have a good stage director and a good cast, it's a good opera.

Again, interestingly enough, I grew up with Massenet's Manon sung by Lotte Lehmann, and Alfred Piccaver. They sang both the Massenet and the Puccini Manon Lescaut.

Pfaff: Who was the tenor?

Adler: Alfred Piccaver. He is British. Beautiful voice. We talked about him, by the way; I mentioned him in connection with Florestan in Fidelio. And Lohengrin: he couldn't sing Lohengrin, but he looked like Lohengrin.

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Adler: You see, when you come back to when you grew up--Piccaver, Lehmann in Manon, even in Tosca (though Lotte Lehmann was really not the ideal Tosca, it was rather Jeritza who in Vienna was the ideal Tosca), Werther, Andrea Chenier--unbelievable. Lehmann, sure, I probably would find that she wasn't Italianate if I would hear her now. But we just loved it. It was just wonderful. And the other Puccini.

Pfaff: When you conceived this new Gioconda in '79, did you have television in mind from the beginning, or did television come later?

Adler: I think as we talked about the details of the production, we must have tried to get the television. If they make you pay for it (as they do when you are not one of the [major] television companies, and even the big companies have to find money for televising) then you think about it.

I am reasonably sure that the Germans, before televising Gioconda, had some misgivings about it, because they don't think--and I don't think they are wrong--that it is a very distinguished work.

Pfaff: Were you interested in having your operas televised?

Adler: Yes, I was. I must confess that I am a little doubtful about opera on television as you see it so often now. I think you need more than a nineteen- or twenty-five-inch screen to enjoy opera. If you want to enjoy the the music, better to be not distracted by a poor picture.

I object much less to opera on tape or radio. But I'm sorry, I don't believe I have listened to an entire opera at one time on television. It's too confined for me.

Also, I am questioning whether there couldn't be another technique of staging opera on television, considering that people watch it on the small screen.

Pfaff: Your Gioconda was done an act at a time, but it wasn't redirected for television?

Adler: If I am not mistaken, we had special rehearsals for it, because certainly the lighting needed adjusting. Nowadays they have cameras which can film almost any production without changing the lighting.

You asked a question, and I immediately stated my opinion about the limited effects of television. Maybe I should say again that I don't think that someone who doesn't know opera--those very few who don't know opera--will gain anything from watching a screen of nineteen inches for three hours. I don't think so.

But at the same time, I was always interested in developments (be it media or technical or electronic, what you wish), and of course one has to try to keep in step with them, whether you personally believe in it or not. The same is true now with subtitles. I don't like subtitles, but it is something that one has to deal with. You cannot just say "no" to such things; there is a reason for these developments. The same goes for opera on the radio and television.

Pfaff: Was part of your hope the carrying of the reputation of your company to a wider audience?

Adler: Probably. But how do you get the wider audience? Do people watch TV? Again, I have my doubts that you can convince many people to watch opera for three hours. I don't think so. That was behind [separating] the acts in Gioconda. We thought it was very effective and they would watch. I think it worked.

Pfaff: I do, too. It was such a smart way to start it.

Adler: Others, naturally, will say that artistically it cannot be defended to do one act at a time. Well, maybe the opera wasn't meant [to be done] this way, but it wasn't written for television either. There are operas written for television, and they are shorter, all of them. We never resolved everything, but I did feel that if a development occurs, I wanted to try it. Whether it's progress or not we won't decide. That will be decided in fifty years.

Pfaff: What did you think about the fact that they ran the piece about the making of this Gioconda at the same time? I mean, the Pavarotti-Scotto fight was on television, and--

Adler: [Mournfully] I know. You see, that is the media. Obviously, I wasn't happy about it. At the time, I wanted to stay [in line] with developments. I wanted to try.

XVI INTO THE 1980s

[Interview 17: June 26, 1985] ##

Remembering Stern Grove

Adler: I came from Chicago on the Overland, the famous train, crowded to the last. Soldiers, Navy, wives of soldiers, wives of Navy, camp followers, whatever you wish. The train came in late, and I had no idea that the terminal was in Oakland, and not in San Francisco. Nobody had told me a thing about it. So I arrived in Oakland, and since there were no buses yet, one had to take a ferryboat to San Francisco.

It was a day without a cloud, in June. Just as beautiful as it could be. I arrived in San Francisco, and Maestro Merola had sent an assistant conductor, a Viennese fellow whom I had known in Vienna, to meet me. I think we were together in a class at the Conservatory.

He met me, and we went to the Whitcomb Hotel, as it was called at that time. It's now The San Franciscan. The owner was Karl Webber. Now Karl was born either in Bolzano or in Merano in Southern Tyrol, and I had known him in 1925, when he was general manager of a hotel there.

I was staying with my mother at his hotel and a mutual acquaintance told us that we both were squiring the same girl. Maybe he was squiring her; I wasn't squiring her at all: she was a girl I had known since childhood, from Merano. Her father was the banker, in Merano, of my grandparents, who always spent part of the year there. So that was who he said I was squiring.

Anyhow, that's where I had a room at first, and I was whisked immediately to Sigmund Stern Grove, where Maestro Merola--whom I had not met--was conducting. I met him very casually in the intermission. Obviously, anybody who comes to Stern Grove for the first time is impressed, especially when it's sunny and warm. I

don't remember the program, but I remember Merola, in his charming way, said, [imitating heavy Italian accent] "Well, come and see me tomorrow."

I took a fancy to Stern Grove, and for many, many years I have conducted there, all kinds of concerts, operas. Merola wasn't too well after a few years, and at times he wanted me to conduct half of the program--sharing it with him. Then I did a chorus concert of opera excerpts and cast all the solo roles with choristers. Sometimes I did half of the program symphonic, half of the program operatic. It was all a mixed fare, you know.

Then I did opera in concert form there, semi-staged, and as we discussed I remember doing Don Giovanni, Lucia [di Lammermoor], and especially Der Freischütz. In [Freischütz there was] stylized action on the platform, and I used the left side (or rather stage right--left of me) for the singers, and the side to my right I used for the orchestra.

We did Hansel und Gretel several times, and instead of the stairway to heaven, we used a flower cove which is unforgettable to me. My older daughter, who was about three or four years at that time, was an angel and she had been told that she would see her daddy, but she mustn't call to him.

So she saw me in the pit (or whatever serves as a pit in Stern Grove), and she didn't call me, but she waved at me, during the performance. Everybody thought it was just charming, and she loved it. I really like to do Hansel und Gretel in Stern Grove, but I have not done it since then, which was the late forties, I guess.

Pfaff: Which daughter did it?

Adler: The older daughter, Kristin. Sabrina did it last year with Marin Opera. But Stern Grove meant a great deal to me, going back to the late Mrs. Stern, her daughter, relatives, and so on. I had not conducted [for] several years in Stern Grove, so my return this month was a special occasion for me.

Pfaff: Did you know members of the Stern family personally?

Adler: Oh, yes.

Pfaff: Which ones?

Adler: Mrs. Sigmund Stern I knew very well, and she was extremely fond of me, as I was of her. And there was Mrs. Marcus Koshland, and so on, you know, all those old dowagers who came. I remember at that time they had jars in which they collected donations from the

audience, because the performances were free, and in the old days, some ladies sat on the stage, counting the contents of the jars. I mean, there were pennies at that time, a lot of them. Such things--I've never forgotten this.

I must say that I've missed my participation in the Stern Grove seasons for several years now, and I was glad to come back last Sunday. It is very different from the park concerts in Golden Gate Park. Of course, the attendance is larger in Golden Gate Park, and it is perhaps a younger crowd. Also, you have more people coming to morning rehearsals than you have at Stern Grove--although last Sunday there were quite a few people at the rehearsal, actually.

In 1940, I did a concert with Grace Moore at Soldier's Field in Chicago, on the lake front. We had over 300,000 people in the audience, and there were thousands--between seven and ten thousand--of people at the rehearsal. On a very hot day; it was burning sun.

Stern Grove has a definite function in the life of San Francisco. There are regulars [who go], and they have cable cars going down the hill for older people.

There are always problems with the amplification, and they have now a new system, about which opinion is completely divided. Some say it is excellent; others say it is no good. I think it depends very much on where you sit, and then it is not necessarily the amplification you complain about, but the loudspeakers.

Last Sunday, there were some people who told me that the amplification was as good as they ever had heard outdoors, outside of New York, but there were others who complained repeatedly.

Pfaff: That was my own feeling about the amplification: I thought it was some of the truest I ever heard. I was sitting on the rise directly across from the stage, and the only trouble I had with the sound was literally when the wind blew it away.

Adler: Against nature, you cannot do anything. You can do a lot with nature, but not against it.

Pfaff: Were those big octagonal disks new?

Adler: Yes.

Pfaff: How did you handle the amplification problems in the past?

Adler: Well, they had a speaker system. They put microphones up in a slightly haphazard way, the usual microphones, you know, but with one short rehearsal, someone who doesn't know the music really cannot broadcast it very well. There were a lot of complaints. There are fewer complaints since we have the new speakers.

As far as I know, there were a lot of discussions whether or not one should put up a shell, but then there was the feeling that Mrs. Stern never wanted a shell, so the family--which still has the say--said Mrs. Stern didn't want a shell, and we must follow her wishes.

This I can understand, but it's regrettable. It could be a very good place, but not unless the acoustics are improved so you can be sure of what you are doing. Even when you perform in a shell, you never know what may happen. Again, the wind, the temperature, everything.

A June Concert at the Grove: 1985

Adler: At least it wasn't humid last time, so the orchestra couldn't complain. You know, it can be terribly humid in Stern Grove.

Pfaff: Well, they stayed in tune. I was impressed.

Adler: They were pretty well in tune. The Sunday before, the San Francisco Symphony was there, and there was a very interesting thing. One of the cellists had an instrument cover which I think was plastic. You can imagine what this must do to the sound. I think he did very well; the cello sounded to me pretty good.

In my program, only the Meistersinger Prelude, the soprano aria from Tannhäuser, and the last Meistersinger excerpt ended forte. Every other number ended piano. That was no plan of mine, but so it was. And naturally, in a concert, you have to be very careful in how you do it. Now, for instance, you mentioned the Lohengrin Bridal Chamber Scene, where you end just before the stage trumpets come in to announce the next scene: piano, with bass clarinet and the timpani. Or the prelude to the third act of Tannhäuser ends with a long passage in the cello, which leads into a chord of flutes and clarinets.

Outdoors you have to be very careful with those things, naturally. The Good Friday Spell is a dangerous one as far as intonation goes. I think the orchestra did very well there.

Pfaff: It was beautiful; I'd never heard it without the voices.

Adler: But it works. Both the Good Friday Spell and the Tristan work without voices, I think. Of course, if you have good voices--in Parsifal you need at least two voices--it's preferable. But you can do it, and I found that the Good Friday Spell goes extremely well outdoors.

I have done it both outdoors and indoors, and I remember once I did it in Golden Gate Park. On that occasion, it was a beautiful afternoon with sunshine and whatnot, and suddenly all the birds started to sing. It was a Good Friday Spell with a bird concert. I have never forgotten this. We talked about this in the morning; unfortunately the birds did not sing in Stern Grove, but the orchestra--

Pfaff: They did a little bit; they're on the tape.

Adler: Yes? Really? Well, in Golden Gate Park they were really stimulated.

You know, the prelude to the third act of Tannhäuser, taken out of the continuity of the opera, is a strange piece. An assistant of mine said to me he didn't think it was a good choice, and I said, "Let's see." After doing it in concert--I'd never done it in concert--I must say I think one can do it. It is, perhaps, not the best composition of Wagner, but then the best composition is only one, so I think it was all right. I needed a short piece, just to give Lohengrin a moment to rest after the Bridal Chamber Scene, and I thought it was about right.

As I may have mentioned before, my main teacher [Alexander Wunderer] was the first oboe of the Vienna Philharmonic, and also was the president of the Vienna Philharmonic at that time, and we talked about all kinds of things. He told me--as I remembered last week when I was preparing myself for this concert--that there was a real problem for the first oboe in the prelude to the third act of Tannhäuser. There's a lot of oboe solo in this prelude, and it is orchestrated in a way that the strings, unless they are careful, cover the oboe, so instead of hearing the oboe solo, you hear the first violins. Now, I asked the strings to play very lightly, and told them the story. I don't know if you noticed, was the oboe audible?

Pfaff: Very clearly audible; I had no trouble hearing it at all. You'll hear it plainly on the tape.

Adler: Ah-hah. I am interested because Wunderer said that in the opera house in Vienna, depending on the conductor, he could make every

effort--and the oboe is mostly piano--but [it would be] covered by the strings. So when you ask the orchestra for lightness (this is a flexible orchestra, the San Francisco Opera Orchestra), you hope to get it.

Pfaff: I thought so; I didn't have any trouble hearing.

Adler: Good. Good.

Two Golden Gate Park Concerts: Margaret Price and William Lewis

Adler: I can tell you another story about the "Liebestod." Seven years ago I conducted a Golden Gate Park concert and Margaret Price was the soloist. I said, "Margaret, wouldn't you sing the 'Liebestod'?" And she said, "Absolutely not. I sang it for a recording, and I promised myself I would never sing it live."

All right. Comes the concert, and I hear afterwards that during the prelude, Margaret got so carried away and thought it was so beautiful that she asked for a vocal score of Tristan, and said, "I'll walk out and I'll sing it; I'll surprise him." Unfortunately, they couldn't find the vocal score, so she couldn't sing it. But it's a nice story, isn't it?

Pfaff: I'm surprised she didn't know it well enough to sing it without a score.

Adler: No. Singers rarely learn an opera role, or an aria even, so well that they can sing it publicly without the score. Of course, singing with a score, I am amazed at how well Bill Lewis did that day. He didn't know until Friday evening that he was to sing on Sunday. He was in Tahoe, and he was called by the opera and asked to come back, and he very kindly got in his car and drove back. I talked to him on Saturday morning before the rehearsal.

But obviously you don't expect the singer, if he is not prepared for something, to sing without the score. For many singers, a score is a hindrance. It was not for Lewis, and I was not only grateful, but I admired him for what he did.

Pfaff: Has he sung all of Lohengrin before, do you know?

Adler: I didn't ask him, because I didn't want to create any mental problem. If a singer is aware of the fact that one knows he hasn't sung a role, he may get more nervous.

It's very strange: on Saturday, he came late to the rehearsal, so we had no opportunity to talk. On Sunday morning, before the orchestra rehearsal, I talked to him about a few phrases, and he was able to [change them], and it worked like a charm.

Do you remember how beautifully he sang this passage [singing]? His piano there was absolutely beautiful, and he had never done it piano. That we discussed before the morning rehearsal, and he tried it in the morning, and it worked, and he was delighted. He wrote me the nicest letter, thanking me and telling me how much he enjoyed the concert, which made me very appreciative.

Pfaff: He was really one of the city's heroes for the day; it was one of the better saves I've seen. How did it go when he took over for Placido in Le Cid?

Adler: It went. He had to be highly commended for agreeing to do it. Of course, it did not go as well. After all, three numbers are different from an entire major role. But he is enormously musical, and when you find something that fits his voice, he can sound lovely. That, I think, was the case Sunday.

I thought that the Meistersinger went very well, also, but did you notice that I modified tempi very much, to help? But it worked, and it can be done. After all, it's a vocal piece. He commented on this, because if you aren't steady [claps an even rhythm] there, you can create problems for a tenor.

Stern Grove Audiences

Adler: Anyhow, about Stern Grove, I was very pleased when Senator Marks started reading the wire which started: "Nancy and I--", and he said, "You know, of course, who this is," and I said, "Yes, my wife."

Pfaff: That was a very nice moment. Also a nice moment was when you said that the good thing about being old is that you can conduct, travel, and have children. The audience liked that very much.

Adler: Yes, well. They are friendly people there, you know, and they are warm in their responses.

Pfaff: One of the things that I have to say--you may not have noticed because your back was to the audience--it was a long program, anyway, and the last half hour it got bitterly cold in the grove. And people bundled up, and not a soul left.

Adler: Really?

Pfaff: Not a soul. I looked all around me, and I didn't see any movement at all.

Adler: I didn't notice. You know, when you conduct you don't notice cold; you notice only heat. That's why I deliberately conduct in the park in shirtsleeves and without a tie when it's hot. And I tell the orchestra to take their coats off and their ties off, because formality doesn't count, but if they feel comfortable, they will play better.

There's a story about Covent Garden. You know, they play into the summer also, and it's an old house, and very, very hot. They play in tuxedos, as a rule, black tie, and at one performance I remember they were told it was so hot they could take off their jackets. But there were complaints after the performance, and some of the musicians said not to do it anymore, it smelled so badly. [Laughs] That was in Covent Garden.

Pfaff: The complaints came from the musicians themselves?

Adler: Themselves.

Conducting a Concert in Shanghai: 1982

Adler: You know, I conducted the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra in 1982, a very good orchestra--and they don't own their instruments; they don't own their tuxedos. But they put on their tuxedos--and especially their tuxedo shirts--over the regular outfits they are wearing. I have never seen such a thing; it's too funny. They wear a shirt, and they put the tuxedo shirt on top, with a ready-made black tie. And they wear two [pairs of] pants.

Pfaff: It sounds miserably uncomfortable.

Adler: I can't understand it. But it was a good orchestra, and I did a very Western program with them. First, the Dvorák Eighth, which the orchestra played very well. I have played it with orchestras in the United States, in smaller communities, which played it less well than this orchestra.

The second half we started with Gershwin's Second Piano Concerto with which they had no problem whatsoever. They had bought a concert grand Steinway in Hamburg, and it was used for the first time for the concert. After that, Carmen Balthrop, the lovely black soprano, sang Barber's "Knoxville Summer of 1915."

That was a piece with some problems. It is a chamber orchestra piece with soprano, and I had a few problems until I got the balance. It's a very transparent piece and has some rhythmic problems, but they managed it. This year, if I would have gone there, I was to conduct the Bruckner Fourth Symphony.

San Francisco Audiences: "Bread and Anchovy-Butter" Operas

Adler: I tell you, I wanted to do Oberon in concert form, and simply didn't find people whom I wanted to cast in it. I think that, in my days in San Francisco, this might have attracted people. We have a public for extravaganzas--although this is really no extravaganza--but for not everyday bread, you know. The attendance at the opera house on such occasions was not off enough to make the board say, "You can't do such things." Maybe it was off a couple of percentage points, but not more, because the people wanted to hear different music.

Of course it changes, and nowadays they want all the bread and butter operas, and the Ring--which is, perhaps, anchovy-butter.

The 1980 Season

A Chagall Magic Flute and Opera Translations

Pfaff: I want to finish up a few things we left from the 1980 season, and then we can get on to more summer thoughts, about your first summer season. We haven't talked about the Chagall Magic Flute; I was wondering why you chose to borrow the Met's production of Chagall, and how you thought it worked.

Adler: Well, we didn't have a good Flute here, you know, and although the Chagall was very successful in New York, it was not the same here. I was disappointed. I thought there would be a different reaction, but there are certain ways of producing and performing operas which go in one city and in one house, and will not go in another house.

That was my recollection of the case with the Chagall. In New York, it was very well received. I think they still use it.

Pfaff: Yes, I think so. Did you always do Flute in English?

Adler: Yes. Because the dialogue is all-important in Flute, and is not [the kind of] dialogue which you can consider as a bridge between musical numbers. It is a part of the entire opera. So the artistic execution depends on the way the dialogue is stated.

Pfaff: What did you think of the Andrew Porter translation, which is the one you used in '80?

Adler: I like Andrew Porter very much, and I respect him as an immensely talented and intelligent man; a musical man. But there were as many shortcomings, probably, in the Porter translation as there were in the Martin translation, except that the Martin translation is dated; it goes back to the forties. So I think that the Porter translation works somewhat better than the Martin translation.

You know, this is so difficult. I was supposed to conduct The Marriage of Figaro in Honolulu, and I had never done it in English here and wanted to do it in English, so I used the Porter translation. As I worked with it, I realized that having grown up with it (and if you please, I did not grow up with Figaro in Italian, but with Figaro in German), I had a resistance to certain passages. I wanted to make changes in the Porter translation.

Finally, I didn't conduct it. I had to cancel because my son Roman came to this world about three weeks late, and since I'd missed the birth of Sabrina because I was conducting a concert with Pavarotti at the Iceland Festival, I didn't want to go to Honolulu and again miss the birth of a child. So I cancelled it. But it was a young cast, with Bob Darling directing, and he and I had worked on it, and I was sorry that I couldn't make it.

Who was the cast in '80?

Pfaff: That was the year you had the very wonderful Sheri Greenawald.

Adler: Who conducted?

Pfaff: [Ulrich] Weder.

Adler: This is a strange thing: I must admit I don't have a very strong recollection of this now.

Pfaff: Dale Duesing was Papageno, and Steven Cole was Monostatos.

Adler: Oh, yes.

Samson and Delilah: More About Opera on Television

Pfaff: The other thing that we left untouched was the Saint-Saens's Samson and Delilah for television. Not that it was done for television; again, I was wondering how many changes you had to make to accommodate television.

Adler: There were not many changes made, to my recollection. We didn't even change the light very much, which may have been a mistake.

Pfaff: This one was telecast on a number of occasions; once during the season, but also several times subsequently. How did it work at that point? Did it cost the opera to have it on television?

Adler: Frankly, I don't remember the details of the contract, but there are certain regulations for repeat performances; they don't cost the same as the first one.

I don't think that I negotiated this contract. It was done by Bob Walker, who at that time handled those things for the opera. The only thing was that my friendly relationship with the unions may have helped, you know. They were trying to accommodate me and realized the importance of broadcasting on both radio and television for an opera company with the ranking we have in the international world of opera.

I find it most regrettable that today it is impossible, seemingly, to have broadcasts, because nowadays the media are like businesses.

Pfaff: I hope that they begin broadcasting again.

Adler: I would wish it for them. I can't understand--it is not that much--that nobody should be found to realize the importance of it.

Pfaff: Do artists, particularly the singers, get any more money for singing in broadcast performances?

Adler: Oh, yes. Naturally, with a commercial broadcast, they get more money. If it is a sustaining broadcast, and the company gets hardly anything out of it, then they get less, but most of the unions demand some extra payment for broadcasts.

I've talked about my problems with television. I think also--with apologies to the gentlemen who direct the telecast--that it could be possible to photograph performances more effectively than it is done. Perhaps there is not the time, and not the money; and that may be one of the reasons. Those people, the directors here, are experienced opera television directors, and they know the scores. They do know the scores.

Pfaff: But the cameramen--

Adler: The cameramen probably not, and they have to be told. That's the problem, and I don't know how much experience they have--by now they should have it.

I read the other day that the Metropolitan Opera has cancelled touring, and is now concentrating on television. I wish them all the luck in the world. So far, they won't get me as a spectator very frequently, and if so, for a short time.

Pfaff: Who was your television director? Did you work with Brian Large?

Adler: First Kirk Browning, and then Brian Large, both. They are the top men.

Pfaff: They are.

Adler: I have seen television directed by Ponnelle, which I found superlative. So many people don't believe in Ponnelle, [but] nobody can change my mind.

Pfaff: I think he's particularly good on television; I'll never forget that Madame Butterfly.

Adler: You are right. It was incredible. But you know, he is such a musician. He has the command of the score, he has the command of the drama, he has the command of acting technique, he knows technically what the cameras can do. It is an all-around knowledge, plus this incredible talent which one cannot describe. Of course, he makes mistakes too, as everybody does; he's entitled to.

Sometimes he gets carried away by some strange sarcastic mood, and does things to spite people. He doesn't do it when I am present, because I can handle it, but I still think that when he is at his best, we are rich to have him.

San Francisco Opera's 1981 Summer Season

Pfaff: How long did you have it in mind to start a summer season for the company?

Adler: A very long time. Not a summer season, necessarily, and not a summer season for the company, but ever since I came to San Francisco, I had the feeling that San Francisco was a city where a summer festival of all the arts and all forms of music, could take place. I remember many, many years ago--it must have been in the fifties--I discussed those ideas with the late Alfred Frankenstein and with Alexander Fried, who were the main critics here. They were extremely supportive and interested in the idea.

How it finally materialized was that we had made a contract with the orchestra which included a considerable number of performances in Los Angeles. And then this Los Angeles season didn't take place, because the money in Los Angeles was not forthcoming, and the San Francisco Opera board felt that if we had to lose more money, we'd better lose it at home than on tour.

Obviously, I liked the idea of going back to Los Angeles, because I have a weakness for the city where so many great men settled. It cannot be as bad as San Francisco likes to say--I should say, not as bad as San Francisco would like to think.

But we had a union agreement which had to be fulfilled, and so I tried to get the arts organizations in San Francisco to join the San Francisco Opera in a summer festival. I did not succeed; I regret to say. But at the meeting of the War Memorial Board (at which I asked to rent the opera house for the summer performances), the chairman said to me: "Next year, you must see to it that other art organizations participate in this festival."

My idea, of course, was to have not only opera, but symphony, chamber music, master classes at universities, lectures, exhibitions--a real music-arts festival in the city of San Francisco with everything the city and its surroundings have to offer. For instance, I thought of serenades in the Stanford arcades, and such things. There couldn't be outdoor performances in San Francisco because the weather was too uncertain, so we thought of having outdoor events on the Peninsula or over in Marin County. Also ACT, and whatnot.

Pfaff: Was the mayor one of the people you were discussing this with? I remember she was trying to promote a festival the first time; there was even a brochure relating things going on.

Adler: To put San Francisco on the musical map in the summer would have attracted a lot of people. But I could not put it over.

Pfaff: Did you think of it because, coming from Europe, you have such a strong sense of summer being festival time?

Adler: No, not at all. I think there are, in comparison, perhaps more summer festivals here in the States than in Europe. Of course, there are bigger and smaller festivals, but there are festivals in the States that are as important as the European festivals. When you speak of important European festivals, what do you mention? You mention Salzburg and Bayreuth for opera, and then of course there are many small festivals.

But by the same token, just to mention a few festivals here, you have the Central City Festival, in Colorado; you have the Colorado Springs Festival--I don't know what it's called exactly--you have Aspen; you have lots of things going on in New York; you have Tanglewood; Saratoga. All right, maybe we're talking about the continent of North America, and maybe acre-wise it is less, but I think we are doing pretty well over here. And if the Salzburg Festival hadn't had the many Americans coming to it, it would not have become what it has.

Pfaff: Do you mean the audience, or onstage?

Adler: Audience. Audience. The same goes, too, in Bayreuth, although it is not the case anymore. If you go to Bayreuth now, besides Germans, there are mostly French people. In Salzburg also. There is a large number of French people who come to the festivals, and Americans; I'm guessing, but I think that the percentage of Americans at the Salzburg Festival is probably higher than in Bayreuth now. Last summer I found that one didn't hear much English [there]. A lot of French, some Italian. But then, if Americans go abroad for festivals, it is probably more difficult to get them to go to the American festivals.

Look, here we have Stern Grove. We have the Concord Pavilion. We have some attractions at Stanford. But I think the traffic would bear more than we have, and I wish one would have courage and try it.

You see, the Ring always sold, but then the publicity given to the Ring here was enormous. If you have the right program in a festival, and you spend that much money on publicity, you'll sell it. Of course, you have to be careful what you present.

Pfaff: Is there a particular problem with doing opera at that time of the year? The Met has had a good season.

Adler: It depends. What do the artists want to do? Who comes and signs them first? (They will not all cancel; some cancel, but not all.) What can you pay? What roles can you offer them? What are the conditions? Do they like the community; do they like the ambience? That matters so much.

I think I got away with a lot when I ran the San Francisco Opera, because many singers sang for me for much lower fees than they wanted. But they did.

Pfaff: Why?

Adler: Maybe they liked San Francisco. Maybe they liked me. I don't know. Also, you have to sell it to them; it depends on how you sell a contract to them. Singers want to be sure of fairness; they don't want to worry about being cheated and find out that some of their colleagues get much more. I never went for that: Some singers would say, "All right, you give me one dollar more than the highest fee you pay," and I said, "Well, I'll give you a dollar less." Because, you know, those mentalities one mustn't support, if one can talk them out of it.

Pfaff: Wasn't it true that some singers sang for a lesser fee because you had them first?

Adler: That may be so, I'm sure. I mean, you know the list of international singers who sang here first when I was director.

Pfaff: So, without support for a citywide festival, why did you finally decide to go ahead and have the Summer Festival of '81?

Adler: There was the orchestra, which had to be paid; there was the chorus, which had a guarantee, and so and so on. And I wanted to do it. I really didn't expect to go all the way alone. I hoped that I would be able to get others to cooperate. Maybe the time was too short.

Pfaff: Did you have less time to plan that season than you would have liked?

Adler: Yes. Well, it took the place of the Los Angeles tour. By the way, I was fortunate: I didn't have to pay many people, because Los Angeles was cancelled, but there were some contracts. But it was planned a long time ahead.

Pfaff: Singing contracts, too?

Adler: Yes.

Reimann's King Lear ##

Pfaff: Let's talk about Aribert Reimann's King Lear.

Adler: I had heard about it, seen a score, seen a libretto, and had heard about the Munich performance, which was also a Ponnelle production, with Gerd Albrecht conducting.

On the way to Munich, I stopped in Dusseldorf and I saw a production of the Rhine Opera, and I was not entirely convinced by the whole project. Then I saw the Munich performance, and I must say that I'll never forget that night--it was perhaps one of the greatest impressions I had in an opera house or in a theater.

Then I went to Vienna and listened to the tapes of the Munich performance with the composer, and we talked a lot and I got educated about the work, and I talked to the conductor, Gerd Albrecht.

At that time the opera public had a lot of confidence in me, and when I brought them something new, most of them were interested and they went, even the old subscribers. And maybe it is my devotion and my optimism, but very few people objected to Lear. In my own mind I didn't call Lear an opera--I called Lear a music theater piece--a perfect example of what I think music theater is or ought to be. The part of the fool was Sprechstimme, and the notation in the score showed musical pitches, but required not a singer but an actor with great musical feeling and talent.

We were most fortunate here. Tom Stewart really had the role of his life; he was so good. I'm on very friendly terms with Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, who did it in Munich and who had a lot of input into the composition of the work. (Reimann was Fischer-Dieskau's accompanist for a very long time, and it was he who suggested it.) So it was written for him, but I must say that I was as touched by Stewart as I was by Fischer-Dieskau, and I found him formidable.

The orchestra reacted very well; the conductor was Albrecht, the same man who conducted in Munich and other places, and he said the orchestra here had a much easier time and reacted in general much better to this kind of scoring than in other places.

You know, we studied the Ponnelle staging, and for the storm scene it was practically necessary to have new hydraulic lifts because we didn't have enough. I think that using the pipes that we had to hang the old-fashioned scenery and the drops as part of the scenery, in keeping with the music and the drama, was a stroke

of genius. I don't know if you remember the pipes going up and down, lit in different ways, but it was spectacular. I was very proud of the production. I'm glad it's coming again.

Pfaff: Was it a similar idea in Munich, of taking the stage back to the walls?

Adler: Absolutely. The idea was the same, but the execution was slightly different, because obviously the technical facilities are different and dimensions, light facilities, and so on. But Ponnelle was very pleased that his demands were met. He is intelligent enough and practical enough that when adjustments have to be made, it is easy for him to accept [them].

In such a complicated production there are all kinds of things that don't work. I cannot really go into details because I don't really remember, but the technical director, John Priest, had one of his most difficult and demanding tasks with Lear, which he resolved very well.

Pfaff: Could you explain a little bit about why it was demanding? I think some people might look at a nontraditional production like that and think it would be simpler.

Adler: Well, the less scenery you have the more difficult it is and the better everything you do must work. I don't think people who saw Lear think that it was simpler than productions with scenery, because it was obvious that the lighting, first of all, was very, very complicated. When you use the naked stage and such things, you have to be very careful how you do it. It may be more simple, but complicated. [Laughter] I'm looking forward to it. That's one performance I will attend, and maybe even a rehearsal.

Pfaff: It's one of the only things I didn't see--I was away--and I'm looking forward to it.

Adler: It's very worthwhile. Be sure to watch the conductor--it's a difficult score to conduct, and he does it with a command of the orchestra and the technique needed for this work that is outstanding.

Pfaff: Did you have to talk Tom Stewart into doing the role?

Adler: Excuse me, but Tom is a very intelligent man, and when he saw the score he realized that was it. There are scores that are musically much more difficult than this one, but as I said, the orchestra, the chorus, the soloists didn't have any problems, and I take this as a sign of the musical value of the composition, [which could be] very difficult to put over. I have great respect for this work.

Die Meistersinger

Pfaff: I was back for the Meistersinger that you used to end that first summer season. It had been off the San Francisco stage for eleven years at that point, and I know that score means a great deal to you.

Adler: Well, one, I grew up with Meistersinger, and two, it was the opera in which I assisted Toscanini in his first Wagner at the Salzburg Festival in 1936, and I still have the vocal score with the marks from the Toscanini rehearsals. I remember many details of those rehearsals. So I think Meistersinger is something that is with me, or I am with it--whatever you wish.

I had more international success with this opera than with other operas. Karl Ridderbusch, who sang Sachs in '81, felt that he did extremely well, which he did, and he thanked me very profoundly in a surprising way. There was a party at an art gallery after the first performance, and all of a sudden Ridderbusch gets up in front of 150 people and makes a thank-you speech in German, thanking me for making it possible for him to finally interpret Sachs in a way that was recognized.

Peter Brenner was the conductor, who was Intendant in Darmstadt, I think.

I remember countless performances of Meistersinger at the Vienna Opera under Franz Schalk, Böhm, Clemens Krauss, Fürtwangler, or in Munich--Knappertsbusch, and then of course, Toscanini in Salzburg. He died in fifty-something [1957] and he was close to ninety, so he must have been in his early sixties or late fifties in 1936.

Herbert Graf was his stage director, and Toscanini tried to assist, or let's call it interfere. Rehearsing the apprentices, Toscanini showed them how to jump in the beginning of the second act, you know? [Laughter] It was absolutely unforgettable! It was the most important and valuable two months of my life, I would say.

Pfaff: I was wondering if in your first summer season you made a deliberate choice of doing Lear, going back to Reinhardt, and Meistersinger, going back to Toscanini?

Adler: If I did it, I don't remember it now. But there were so many, many things I had to do, that I don't know whether you just interpret it this way or whether I meant it; I don't remember it frankly. I think with the Lear, yes, because I was coming to the end of my time as director of the opera, and that reminded me of my start in the theater in Vienna with Shakespeare with Max Reinhardt. With the Meistersinger, I think I wanted to do a kind of memorial for Robert Watt Miller.

In the summer we had difficulty determining how often we could repeat an opera. We had a pretty good idea how often we could repeat operas in the fall seasons, and how many subscriptions we could afford, but in the summer it was very difficult and I think at times we guessed wrong. But we didn't have much choice, because in order to get singers here, there is a certain minimum of performances or dollars you have to guarantee them, regardless of whether they are Americans or Europeans. If you want them to sit still for "x" weeks, they feel they have to make "x" dollars.

The big roles are usually cast with singers by the performance, and the others are paid by the week, and there are union regulations about how many performances of major and lesser roles you can have without paying extra. There are singers who are willing to sing a role for less money, if they are interested in it, and others who say, "Well, this is such an important role, I just have to have 'x' dollars."

You have to think about the vocal demands on a singer. If a singer does certain roles too often, he may shorten his career, especially if he is not technically perfect.

Planning the 1981 Fall Season: Carmen

Pfaff: What special considerations went into the planning of your last season?

Adler: Obviously, we tried to do a good season. Everybody likes to be in good standing when he leaves, right? I had never worked with Ponnelle [as conductor], and so we did that Carmen together. I had heard Teresa Berganza sing the arias from Carmen in Hamburg, and it was unbelievably effective.

So I told her I would like to have her as my Carmen in my last year and she had some doubts about the opera house--she thought it would be too big. But I discussed it with Ponnelle and he liked the idea very much and they worked extremely well together.

Domingo was very anxious to sing my last performance, and he came for the last two Don Josés.

What else was there that season?

Pfaff: There was the big Aida; you had the important revivals of The Merry Widow, the Trovatore, Walküre, Lady Macbeth, Semiramide--

Adler: Listening to you I see it was an interesting program.

Pfaff: It was a very interesting program. [Laughter]

Adler: Of course, at that time we had many subscription series which all sold well. We used to reach above 95, 97, 98 percent attendance, and the singers that we had that year and the repertoire made a strong season. Naturally we lost a lot of money on some things, but we would have had to pay the orchestra, some singers, some chorus anyway, and this way we performed at least and started something for the future.

Pfaff: I'm curious about why Domingo explicitly asked to be in your last performance. Had you conducted him before?

Adler: Yes, but we were friends. Domingo was nobody when he came through here from Mexico and auditioned for me. I did not engage him at that time. He was wild--the Latin temperament--and the next audition was at Town Hall in New York. I asked him if he could sing the tenor role in L'Amore dei Tre Re for me, and he said, "No, I don't know it, but I'll sing it for you day after tomorrow." And that was true.

But we have been friends for many years. We had a problem once when he involved me for a short time in the battle of ranking with the other tenor, with whom I'm also on very friendly terms, but that was straightened out very shortly and it was Plácido who, for instance, was helpful in bringing the opera to the Philippines [in 1979]. The Tosca with Eva Marton, and he and Díaz, and I conducted. Italo Tajo was along as the Sacristan, too.

When he came and sang the last two Don Josés in 1981, it was not only that he sang, but there was a major farewell party for me on the stage, attended by hundreds of people--personnel, friends, etc.--and he, impromptu, emceed this show practically. He ran the show that night, without having been asked.

Pfaff: Carmen hadn't been done since 1970, I believe, when you brought it back in 1981.

Adler: Well, the old production was not only dated, but it was in terrible shape. It was a production Dino Yannopoulos had conceived with Howard Bay. I never was quite happy with that production, but it paid for itself, I'm sure, and rendered good service. But we needed a new one, and before you find the one you want, it doesn't really make sense to have a new production of Carmen.

So that year it was first Teresa Berganza and then Hanna Schwarz, and she didn't rehearse with Ponnelle, unfortunately, because I think it would have been a different Carmen if she had rehearsed with him.

And then we had a problem with the Escamillo, not the original Escamillo--I forgot who sang it.

Pfaff: Oh, it was [Simon] Estes the first time and Lenus Carlson the second.

Adler: Someone else was planned. I remember with great pleasure and satisfaction the performance I did of Tristan with Estes as King Marke, and I'm not sure Escamillo was really his role. Under Ponnelle I was quite pleased with him, if I remember right. Of course, some people didn't like the Mountain Scene--they thought it was silly to climb up and down the mountain, you know how people are.

But I thought it was quite strong and effective, and Bonisolli and Estes worked very hard on the duet in the third act as Don José and Escamillo, and we didn't make the traditional cut in that scene, because it leaves out music that may not be the most valuable music, but I think it 's terribly important have it in. Of course, with Ponnelle you never cut, you only add! [Laughter]

Thoughts About Retirement

Adler: You know, when I had worked for the San Francisco Opera for thirty-nine years--twenty-nine years as director--to see the end coming was very difficult. When you don't have to go to the office anymore and can't sit on the back of your staff anymore, it's a bad morning.

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Adler: When my friend Mr Schaefer, Intendant in Stuttgart, resigned after many years, I invited him to come here during the fall season when we did the [1972] Ring, to come and write some things for the

program and give some advice, and so on, mainly so he didn't have to sit in Stuttgart when the new Intendant started.

Those things are hard to overcome, you know? How many years--three years? Three years have passed. I have been asked recently to do Western opera in another Chinese town. I won't mention the name of the town, but there is an opera company there that performed Western opera and they want to revive it now, and I'm supposed to do the first revival. So we'll see. We'll know when in two months.

The Question of Language: Taking the Opera to China

Adler: We discussed the language the performances should be given in and I said, "If you have Western singers we'll do it in the original language." China is used to something like subtitles--they are vertical on account of their alphabet--but it was at performances of opera in China that I first wondered what would happen if one would do such a thing in the States.

But I suggested they not force Western singers to sing in Chinese, rather to sing in the original language and use subtitles, and if it was to be in Chinese, I suggested they avoid the long recitatives. As you know, I was to conduct The Marriage of Figaro there, but even if I learned a little Chinese, this would not be right. To do something where the words are as important as in a Mozart recitative in Chinese, I could only give half of what I normally could, because I couldn't master it.

It's the same when a conductor who doesn't speak Italian tries to frame a Mozart recitative in Italian. There were some name conductors here who didn't speak Italian and wanted to do Marriage of Figaro in Italian, and it didn't work. That goes back before my day.

Pfaff: Is there much of a crop of Chinese singers to pick from?

Adler: I think so. I did opera excerpts three years ago in China, and three of the singers [who performed] won the vocal competition in Vienna last year. So they must have held up in competition.

I had an excellent tenor in Bohème who sang the "Che gelida manina" and a very good Marguerite in Faust. I had a good Gilda--I remember her with pleasure.

With women especially there is a problem singing in Chinese. You have to have a very bright, nasal sound, which is not so good

for Western opera, but you have to work with it, and if the singers are talented, you can do a lot with them.

Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk and Director Jerry Freedman: 1981

Pfaff: Let's take a minute and talk about Shostakovich's Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk.

Adler: Well, we had performed Katerina Ismailova,¹ which is a tempered-down version, mostly in terms of the libretto and musically to some degree, after I had seen it conducted in Dusseldorf by Albert Errede, of all people. It was a big success, with Marie Collier, who was very, very good here, and Vickers.

At that time, the Russians would not allow the material to be performed in the West, but then it became possible, and we picked it up. I think it was the right thing to do, especially because Calvin Simmons, who unfortunately drowned not long afterwards at the age of twenty-two, did a magnificent job with the score.

Anja Silja was Katerina, and I sent a Russian coach to her--she thought at first she wouldn't be able to do it in Russian--but she managed it very well, I thought. It was a huge success because it is music that may be very popular in many spots; it has power, strength, invention--and other spots which are extremely melodic. Of course, in Russian that sounds better than in English. I'm glad I was able to do this for the opera, for Shostakovich and for Calvin Simmons, who had his major success in it.

Pfaff: Did you think it was somewhat premature for him?

Adler: No.

Pfaff: We haven't talked about your whole association with him, and I think now is a good time to do it.

Adler: I think we need more time for this. But I had full confidence that Katerina was something he could do. You know, he [Simmons] in his last year told me that he was very much affected by Wagner. He did excerpts from Wagner in Oakland, and there I wasn't so convinced it wasn't a little early. Of course, for someone who didn't grow up with it, Wagner is difficult.

¹The American premiere, 1964.

I grew up with Wagner, and I remember after the First World War, the streetcars stopped running at 7:30. A performance of Meistersinger would start at 2:00 in the afternoon and go until 7:00. Well, I had to walk to the opera house, which took me an hour and a half, to stand in line for standing room. Then you stood for five hours for Meistersinger and then walked home if you missed the streetcar.

Wagner was performed in Vienna a great deal. Perhaps it was less of a specialty in the repertoire than it is here now. But it was a matter of course that it was performed with great artists. And of course the orchestra. Most of the Vienna Philharmonic also played the opera.

The chorus at that time wasn't the most attractive to look at, but they sang beautifully. But the style of opera performance and production has changed a great deal.

Pfaff: Who was this Freedman who directed Lady Macbeth?

Adler: We talked before about Jerry Freedman, a drama director whom I first brought out for Spring Opera Theater. His first production was the Monteverdi Orfeo, and when I saw the last rehearsals of that show I was desperate. I said, "Jerry, I'm afraid that this approach simply won't go over in San Francisco." So we talked a lot and he changed the production and his approach. He listened and he thought I was probably right, which can only mean that he was not quite convinced himself. He had not done much opera before that.

Later on he directed The Saint Matthew Passion for Spring Opera Theater and it was outstanding. Death in Venice, which he directed, was according to the publisher the best production anywhere.

Of course, I also let him direct at the San Francisco Opera, and I think that Lady Macbeth was very good, and the Angle of Repose--as far as the direction goes--was very good. I was not happy with the [summer 1985] Nabucco I conducted. I don't think he got the full impact of the chorus in Nabucco. There were other reasons why I thought it didn't work, but just as I wanted to [conduct] once with Ponnelle, I wanted to work once with Jerry Freedman.

Actually it was my successor who did the Nabucco, but he knew we were friends and he probably thought we would work well together, which we did, but I wasn't happy, let's put it that way. Our association through the years meant a great deal to Jerry, and I think it meant a great deal to me. I wish I could do The Saint Matthew Passion once more, and perhaps even conduct it!

XVII 1981--THE ADLER ERA COMES TO AN END

[Interview 18: July 1, 1985] ##

Calvin Simmons: A Very Special Talent

Pfaff: We began talking a little bit about your association with Calvin Simmons, which we've mentioned a few times, and we're going to do it in full this time, leading up to Lady Macbeth. Can you tell me when you first encountered Mr. Simmons and what your relationship to him was?

Adler: When I first encountered him, he was Master Simmons. He was about ten years old, and a member of the San Francisco Boys Chorus, or maybe it was still called San Francisco Opera Boys Chorus at that time, I'm not quite sure. I started the chorus with the consent of my predecessor, Maestro Merola in the late forties, when I was chorus director and had to find singing boys for the opera.

With the support of the director of the public school system, we had auditions and selected some boys, and Maestro Merola asked who should direct the chorus. I had heard that Madi Bacon had just arrived in San Francisco--I knew her from Chicago--and I suggested her as director of the boys' chorus. Maestro Merola met her, and somehow she made him terribly nervous. He said to me, "If you want Madi Bacon as director, that's fine with me; you surely know what you are talking about. But I don't have to talk to her, do I?"

Madi, who was a very fine and sensitive musician, had to get used to the requirements of the opera stage, because there are many choruses which require a much more aggressive attitude in singing than what was needed in concert. Madi, of course, knew opera, and she realized what was expected of those little kids. Well, one little creature was Calvin Simmons.

Pfaff: In the very first crop?

Adler: I don't know if it was the first crop but Madi, being enterprising and daring as she is, let Calvin accompany some choruses on the piano, which he could do very well--and then conduct choruses. When I saw him for the first time, I was completely amazed at what this little fellow was able to do.

Of course, you know how Calvin developed--he was here; he was in Philadelphia; he was in Cincinnati and so on--but the important thing was that a very close relationship between Calvin and me developed. He was one of the most loyal friends I have had, whom I enjoyed, not only because he was enormous fun, but because of his great sincerity about music and music-making and about his ambitions.

Once when I did a stylized concert version of Don Giovanni with some young singers (it was sung in Stern Grove), I arrived a little late for rehearsals, and so Calvin, who was to be my accompanist and assistant, started to rehearse. The results were so amazing that, not only did I let him continue, but I offered him a three-year contract, an exclusive contract with the San Francisco Opera, so I could use him wherever possible for the opera and for his own purposes, meaning his own development.

So he worked not only for San Francisco Opera as accompanist and assistant conductor. I believe he had some chorus rehearsals too, but he conducted for Western Opera Theater--very well, I would say--and the Merola Opera Program. In general he always was liked; everybody loved to work with him. He developed many friendships all over the opera house, in the wig department or among musicians, choristers, principal singers, young singers, comprimarios. There wasn't anybody who didn't like him or think very highly of him.

When the three years was coming to an end, I said to Calvin, "You know, I don't want to lose you; I always want you to consider San Francisco Opera as your home. You belong to it, and it belongs to you. But I think you have to go out and find out how other musicians function, and see how you can do."

That's when he left. He worked at the Metropolitan Opera, and later on at City Opera of New York. He guest conducted symphony orchestras, too. I conducted performances of Il Trovatore with the Philadelphia Opera when Calvin was guest conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra--Mr. Ormandy's orchestra at the time--and we had a wonderful time. I observed also his dedication to the Curtis Institute, where he had studied. I enjoyed that period in Philadelphia enormously.

When he came back to San Francisco, he conducted the regular repertoire and student matinees, sometimes without rehearsal. I am

ashamed to say that I was not able to give him orchestra rehearsals en masse. But the climax was when I assigned Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk by Shostakovich to him in 1981. I had seen in the meantime how well he got along with stars and superstars; for instance, Beverly Sills became a close friend of Mr. Simmons, Mary Costa, and whatnot. When it came to working with him, they all had respect for him and loved to work with him.

The same was true of the San Francisco Opera Orchestra and the San Francisco Opera Chorus. Lady Macbeth was a personal triumph for Calvin, and I remember the interludes, which he put over with enormous strength. The orchestra loved what he did and they showed it to him. If it wouldn't have been for this unfortunate accident, he would have conducted on and on, as long as I was in San Francisco.

Calvin visited a former assistant of mine, Richard Rodzinski, who also became his friend, at Rodzinski's home at Lake Placid several times. Richard Rodzinski's mother, Mrs. Rodzinski, the widow of the famous conductor Artur Rodzinski, also adored Calvin, and he was a well-liked guest both in Lake Placid and in New York, where they had residences.

Calvin was on vacation in Lake Placid as Mr. Rodzinski's guest when he had this infamous canoe accident. The Adler family was at that time on a boat coming home from Europe, and they called me in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean to tell me what had happened. I got off in Boston instead of proceeding to New York, and I flew home from Boston, because that way I wouldn't have to look at water anymore.

Before we left for Europe, Calvin was a guest for dinner at our house in the City and Nancy said to him, when we said good-bye for the summer, "Calvin, when we come back in August, the pool will be ready in our house." We were remodeling a house we'd bought in Marin County. And Calvin answered, "Oh, I must come over immediately and swim there." It is incomprehensible to me, because I learned later that people said Calvin really wasn't a very good swimmer.

Pfaff: Oh, I had heard the opposite.

Adler: I am not sure; I heard, actually, the accident could have had so many causes we need not attribute it to this. But I had heard from many sides that he was not a good swimmer, which surprises me. But still, his last words in my ear were, "Then I must come over immediately and swim in your pool."

I think that the music world has lost a talent which could have risen to great heights. Calvin, as conductor of the Oakland Symphony, was just in the process of maturing in the way he handled music. He handled an orchestra very well as a kid, but he found [new] expression, thoughts, feelings, dynamics in the scores he studied, which made me believe that he was "on the way" in every respect.

One of the last things he said to me was that he had found great love and affinity for Richard Wagner, which had not been the case before. I would have been very interested to hear him conduct the Parsifal excerpts he had scheduled for the next Oakland Symphony season.

Personally, I lost somebody who was as close to me as anybody could be, and who was part of my outer and inner life. A tragic loss, this accident. It really was.

The summer before the accident he had conducted in St. Louis, and that was a great experience for him. He had known the stage director there, Jonathan Miller, who was in Europe before.

Calvin loved to make jokes, to laugh and to make people laugh, but that was really not his only side. He had an enormously serious side, which he perhaps hid somewhat behind his joie de vivre. I should definitely mention his love and loyalty for his parents. He was very much concerned how he could help his mother, and wanted her to be part of his life also. But he was a creature of surprises, always something new and different.

I remember one meeting at his house up in the Berkeley Hills after he died. His mother was there and Madi Bacon. It wasn't very clear yet what was to be done with his library, which I think finally went to Curtis. His mother gave me a clock, which you hear on the table there. It enriches my study, and means a great deal to me.

Pfaff: Were you prepared for the level of success he had with that Lady Macbeth?

Adler: I am always prepared for a level of success; what I am not prepared for is a level of failure. I don't think that there was any way he could not have succeeded with Lady Macbeth. He worked very well with Anja Silja, who sang a very nice performance, and with everybody else. It was music which inspired him and which he gave back in an inspired way. The fact is that Lady Macbeth in Russian was an even greater success than Katerina Ismailova in English several years before.

Pfaff: When you told him after the three-year contract that he should go out and try some other things, did you play a role in his getting the post at the Oakland Symphony?

Adler: I don't think so. It's quite possible that I talked to the Oakland people about him, and I certainly would have recommended him, but it is not something that would have been predominant for his engagement. I remember that I organized a memorial concert with the Oakland Symphony for Calvin, and there were, I believe, seven different conductors on the podium that night, all San Francisco residents who had worked with Calvin and who liked Calvin. I did the final two selections, one with Jess Thomas, the famous tenor, who was also a friend of Calvin's--a selection from Die Walküre and finally the Meistersinger Prelude--because I had been asked, and rightly so, to end on an "up" beat. In the Meistersinger Prelude the orchestra outdid itself; it was a real, real triumph. I turned around and said, "This is Calvin's triumph."

He had also engaged me to conduct a pair of symphony concerts, or three symphony concerts, with the Oakland Symphony that season. I went through with it, but it was not easy for me. He wanted me to do an all-Brahms concert, which I did, including the Third Symphony. It's very sad in spite of the F major; there's a great expression of sadness in it, and we did the Brahms Second Piano Concerto, with Alicia de Laroccha. And there was also tragedy in her life. This concerto perhaps was not necessarily the concerto you would expect her to play, but her husband encouraged her to study it, and he had died suddenly just three or four weeks before this concert, so Alicia played it for the first time. She was in great, great despair that she had lost her husband. I had conducted a Mozart concerto with Alicia and the Columbus Symphony.

Pfaff: Did you not also pick up the Wagner concert that he had scheduled and conduct that?

Adler: The Parsifal concert? No, I didn't.

The San Francisco Boys Chorus

Pfaff: I wanted to go back to something you said earlier: for one thing, I didn't know that the San Francisco Boys Chorus was started by you for the opera; it's become so independent now.

Adler: That's always the case with auxiliary organizations. When they are successful, they become independent, and it's understandable. The same was true of the San Francisco Opera Ballet, which, as the San

Francisco Ballet, became more and more important. One season, during the time I was running the company, I learned, I think it was June or July, that they would not be available in the fall for the season.

Pfaff: The Opera Ballet?

Adler: The San Francisco Ballet at that time.

I think now the boys chorus goes on tours again and again, and the ballet does, of course, and they are completely independent organizations, only hired by the San Francisco Opera for the seasons. Still, at one time the ballet let me down so terribly, I thought that there should be some kind of obligation to the parent organization. And now it is so many years back--why on earth such difficult times?

I should, perhaps, mention that in my last year we started the San Francisco Girls Chorus under Elizabeth Appling, a very talented director, and, from what I hear, the girls chorus is doing very well. Which doesn't change the fact that my little girl, Sabrina, the five-year-old, is an honorary member of the San Francisco Boys Chorus. [Laughter]

Pfaff: In the light of what you had said about starting the boys chorus for the opera, what was it that you perceived in seeing young Calvin conduct?

Adler: He was skillful technically; his beat was good, clear, and musical. And he was able to make music when he conducted when he was ten or eleven years old. I do not believe necessarily in "wunderkind," and I'm glad Calvin didn't become one, but certainly, as we said earlier, the maturing process had started fairly recently, before Calvin died. He interpreted; he heard; he saw all kinds of things in musical scores which he had not done before.

Pfaff: Had you engaged him to conduct other things, or had it not come to that yet?

Adler: Sorry, I don't remember. I'm sure we talked about it; I wouldn't be surprised if the Wagner [repertoire] would have been in Calvin's thoughts. But I don't remember, really.

The 1981 Season

Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk

Pfaff: While we're still on the subject of Lady Macbeth, I should ask you how much the original Skalicki production was revamped for Lady Macbeth. Was it mostly musical revision?

Adler: Well, it's a difficult score in many parts, and the libretto is far more daring and impolite than your mellowed Katerina Ismailova. In the production there were not too many program changes. When we did the production the first time, we had, in the courtyard scene, a very complicated machine that Jon Vickers jumped out of, and [with] his incredible gymnastic talent did all kinds of fascinating exercises or whatever you want to call it. Now, of course, the action was different in the book, but I don't remember that we changed it substantially.

A New Semiramide

Pfaff: One production that certainly brought a brand new look to San Francisco that year was your season-opening Semiramide with Pier Luigi Pizzi settings.

Adler: I always wanted to do one of Rossini's more or less bel canto works, and Semiramide was one we could cast. Mr. Pizzi, a very interesting man, gave us a production which was all white, and somehow it didn't quite suit the fancy of San Franciscans. He was also new in directing; he not only designed Semiramide, he directed it. I think the public actually liked it, but they were not happy with the white production.

This is perhaps an opportunity to mention that sometimes productions which favor one color all through do not entirely match the music, because certainly a Rossini score, for example, does not have one color all the way through. And in a work that is not familiar to the public, the result was somewhat monotonous. The costumes were kind of odd, to say the least; they were not natural, flowing costumes, but they made more or less stylized figures out of the singers (or actors, if you so wish), and there was a completely different style of movement, of acting, than one was used to. I don't know if it fit Rossini entirely.

Pfaff: What was his point in costuming his people as architectural models, almost?

Adler: I do not remember. Mr. Pizzi is a man who doesn't say too much. He cannot be reached very easily, either. So he had done this production in a similar way before, and it was very successful, and he said, "You must trust me that it will work." Well, sometimes you do.

Pfaff: One of the strong innovations in that production, I remember, were the two so-called aria ramps that went out over the orchestra. What was involved in building them and what did you think about it?

Adler: Well, I was always hoping that nobody would fall in the pit. There were safety precautions applied, not only for the two ladies, who were heavy enough to deserve those precautions, but also for the members of the orchestra who were underneath and somewhat nervous. People in the pit were very upset when they heard the steps of Miss Caballé and Miss Horne above them for the first time in rehearsal.

Pfaff: How were they held up?

Adler: It was a technical safety device which John Priest, our technical director, had to provide--and invent--in some cases. In musicals, you have this all the time, but you rarely have it in opera.

I remember a performance of Katya Kabanova in Stuttgart where this was also the case. The entrances and exits were from the audience end of the pit. In musicals, it's done all the time. Not only for two heavy--well, not light--ladies, but in musicals for an entire group of chorus girls who dance around there. Of course, they are very secure in their abilities.

Pfaff: What was the reason for doing this? These were not two ladies that one had a hard time hearing in the first place.

Adler: I think that Mr. Pizzi's idea was to bring the arias (because that's where it was used) as close into the public, into the auditorium, as possible.

Pfaff: This also meant that the women had to sing without a prompter when they went out there. Was that a problem?

Adler: Well, not entirely, because a good prompter can help wherever he is. Of course, prompters never like the physical absence of the singers. I remember when Ponnelle had Liu dying on the prompter's box in Turandot, the prompter was very unhappy.

Pfaff: [Laughter] Which prompter was that--was that Philip Eisenberg?

Adler: I'm sure.¹

Musical Theater in the Opera House

Pfaff: You had Mr. Bonyngé for two assignments; besides Semiramide, he was conducting The Merry Widow production from the Canadian Opera. What were your feelings about doing operetta in the fall season and your thoughts about that particular arrangement?

Adler: Well, I have absolutely no objections to doing operetta or musicals during the fall season. Mr. Bonyngé did a version of The Merry Widow [1981], as he did of Fledermaus once before [1973], which is far different from the versions I grew up with, but then I grew up many years ago, and maybe if you would do a version of such operettas in Vienna now, they would also look different from what they looked like when I grew up.

Pfaff: Was it just a different look that he arranged?

Adler: Well, not "look"; musically it was different. It sounded different. He used an overture to Merry Widow which had been done before, and, actually, I have conducted it once; but it somehow does not quite go with the rest of the operetta unless you reorchestrate Lehar, the whole Lehar work. But it has been done.

I am in favor of doing both opera and "lighter" opera, let's call it, or musical theater, whatever--in the same house if you can. I think it is a good change for the audience; I think it encourages composers of either art form, and it is an opportunity for singers. We all know that opera singers love to be starred in musical theater; we have them on Broadway, and we have them when an opera house does a lighter piece. And, of course, the musical theater singers hope to have enough voice to sing opera, if asked to do so.

Pfaff: Being Viennese yourself, what was your feeling about the way that Mr. Bonyngé did the two, Fledermaus and Merry Widow, in the editions he did them in?

Adler: Well, Mr. Bonyngé has a very special way with certain things, and I think his recordings of those works, and especially all the ballet music, are outstanding. Personally, as I said before, I had the

¹Gordon Jephtas was prompter.

problem that my idea of Viennese style was different. I had conducted both Merry Widow and Fledermaus often, and I think they were very different.

As I mentioned before, I conducted a Merry Widow on tour with Martha Eggerth, the film actress, and her husband, Jan Kiepura, the famous Polish tenor. Mr. Kiepura had inserted all kinds of songs, which I have forgotten, into the score of Merry Widow, that just didn't fit in at all. They were stylistically impossible. But the public just ate it up.

Mr. Kiepura was not easy to get along with, and the gentleman who conducted before me couldn't get along with him, so I took over for him in Chicago. I just had moved from Chicago to New York, and I came to Chicago to conduct Merry Widow in the opera house several months before it folded. Jan Kiepura was one of the most incredible top voices, tenors, and a very good-looking fellow; also a very unique personality. I knew him from Vienna and Salzburg, and we were friends. It was he who asked me to take over Merry Widow, because he wanted to get rid of the conductor, and I asked the conductor, "When would you like to leave?" He said to me, "Can you conduct tonight's performance?" It was ten minutes before the curtain--in Baltimore.

Pfaff: [Laughter] Did you?

Adler: No. Martha Eggerth was a very nice, ambitious lady. She had coached Schubert songs with me in Salzburg, at the Festival when I was there, which she used in her Schubert film Serenade.

But to sum it up, I am for mixed repertory if you can do it. I think that Beverly Sills is doing the right thing; perhaps she is a little heavy on musical theater pieces at the moment. But no objection on my part.

I remember when one of my colleagues chose to put on a musical to help his opera house financially, and it wasn't liked in Washington. On the NEA opera panel (I was on the opera panel), colleagues of mine very strongly advocated cutting subsidies for that opera house, and my response to this was, "We are here to help. We cannot help as much as it is needed, no way, so if an opera man has the guts to try something to help himself, even if it is a musical theater piece, I don't think we should penalize him and cut back his opera subsidies."

Il Trovatore

Pfaff: Another revival that was important for its cast in your final season was Il Trovatore, when you brought Leontyne Price back in a role that she virtually owned.

Adler: Well, Il Trovatore was one of the first operas Price appeared in in San Francisco, in 1958. I remember her tenor was Jussi Björling, so you can see what voices I had available in the fifties! Jussi was very, very nice to her; he tried to make her feel at ease as much as he could, and I must say, the second aria in Il Trovatore was one of the most beautiful things I remember of Leontyne's. It sounded out of this world.

Die Walküre: Jess Thomas Saves the Day ##

Pfaff: When you mounted Die Walküre in your last season, were you trying to reprise that famous Walküre from 1956, when you had [Birgit] Nilsson and [Leonie] Rysanek? You brought them both back.

Adler: Well, you are always trying to assemble the best cast. You don't necessarily think of repeating, because, frankly, there is always the risk that the memory is better than the reality was. But if you talk about names like Nilsson and Rysanek, naturally you aim for the best. And both ladies had made their American debuts here in San Francisco with me.

Pfaff: One of them in that opera.

Adler: What was the debut for Rysanek?

Pfaff: Flying Dutchman; same season. I think just one performance before.

This was the beginning of the famous substitutions that you had that year. You lost Jimmy [James] King to a cold, and you got Jess Thomas as Siegmund. How did that work?

Adler: That was a very, very dangerous moment. There are not too many tenors--there were not too many tenors at any time, certainly--whom you would have wanted for Siegmund. Furthermore, my budget was rather tight. In all the years that I ran the opera, if I'm not mistaken, I only went over budget twice. So I had no quotas, and I actually was accused for my gambling, but somehow I was always in the fortunate situation to somehow work my way out of the hole.

Pfaff: There was really no cover in this situation.

Adler: That day, Jimmy King called me at noon at home before a one o'clock curtain of Die Walküre at the opera house. He had absolutely no voice; he just couldn't sing. And I said to him, "Listen, if I don't find my way out, there's no performance today." He said, "I'm sorry; I cannot do it, there's just nothing there."

Well, I don't know; he had been, I think, in Carmel, and gotten married that week before the performance. If this had something to do with it or not--I don't think so, frankly, but I had to mention it.

I suddenly thought, perhaps Jess Thomas--who lives in Tiberon--is at home. I called him, he answered the phone, and we talked. We hadn't seen each other for a while, and he said, "We must get together soon," and I said, "Yes, indeed. What are you doing this afternoon?" He said, "Well, I kind of have an appointment." I said, "Oh. You know, I really would have liked to see you. As a matter of fact, I would like to see and hear you as Siegmund at one o'clock at the Opera House."

He said, "What?! Frankly, Kurt, I don't know if I have it in my voice at the moment; I have not sung for a week or two. I'll call you back." In ten minutes he called back and said, "I can do it." So I said, "Thank God! Now get in your car and come to the opera house immediately, please." And he said, "But I am not shaved!" And I said, "Jess, Siegmund, in The Valkyrie, is a fugitive. He has no razor with him; he's not shaved. Come as you are!"

Well, he was at the opera house, ten to one, shaved. He had sung this production before; we still had his costumes, his wigs; everything was prepared in his dressing room. He had sung with Rysanek and with Otmar Suitner, who was conducting, so it was not too much of a risk, really, and on top of it, Jess is a skilled, musical tenor and good actor who knew what he could do.

So, at one o'clock sharp, I went before the public with a few jokes. I told them that an hour ago we had had no Siegmund, and you know how the public reacts. I said, "But now, we do have a Siegmund, and I think you will like him." I told them that Jess Thomas had agreed to sing, and there was a storm of enthusiasm through the house.

Jess sang one of his best performances that afternoon, and I always felt that I owed Jess something. So when I conducted the Wagner concert later that year in Stern Grove, I invited him to be the featured tenor together with Pilar Lorengar, but to his and my

great regret, he got sick the week preceding the concert and couldn't get rid of the nasty hoarseness he had. He was hoarse in the very first rehearsal we had and never got better.

Pfaff: So he was not exactly in retirement, or was he?

Adler: At that time, he was retiring, although he's still singing concerts here and there. I did the "Winterstürme" from Die Walküre with him at the memorial concert for Simmons three years ago.

Aida: Leontyne Price Steps In

Pfaff: It's interesting that the two most famous substitutions of your final season both ended up in very, very good performances, not just covers. The other one, of course, being the substitution of Prices in Aida; can you tell the story?

Adler: Margaret Price, who lives in Munich mainly, wanted to sing Aida here. We had discussed it for quite a while, but when she arrived, she wasn't well, and she wasn't sure if she would be able to sing.

It was the opening of the season, and she did it, and it went well, without being the best performance that Margaret Price sang in San Francisco. She pulled through. That night, Leontyne Price arrived at eight o'clock in San Francisco--what was she singing that season?

Pfaff: Trovatore.

Adler: Trovatore, of course. I called her in the hotel--which I always did when she arrived--and she said, "What is it? You sound nervous." And I said, "Well, I am a little nervous; your namesake is not well." And she said, "You don't mean you want me to sing Aida tonight?" And I said, "Maybe I do."

So we were joking, and we agreed that she would be ready to come to the opera house and take over in case Margaret couldn't finish the performance. At about quarter of ten, after the Nile Scene, I called her and said, "Leontyne, thank you very much. Go to bed; it's quarter of one your time, Eastern time."

But Margaret didn't get better; she got worse. And I said to her, "Look, if you cannot sing the next performance, please don't tell me at the last minute." I had told Leontyne already that she wasn't getting better and asked if she would sing the next performance, and she said she would never let me get stuck.

So when Margaret said no, she couldn't risk it--it was the day before [the next performance], I think--Leontyne came for a rehearsal. She walked through a production that she did not know and she rehearsed with the conductor, Maestro [Garcia] Navarro, who was new at that time.

You remember what happened. She had not sung Aida in several years, and I have heard many of her Aidas, but I hadn't heard her sing like that. The Nile Scene was unbelievable; the last scene was unbelievable. She affected all her partners. Pavarotti was much less nervous than he had been before, and they sang the third and fourth act as though they had learned the role together. It was just beautiful. Neither she nor I will forget it, and I'll always be grateful for the fact that she did it, and that it worked out so splendidly.

Pfaff: It was certainly an enormous public success as well as an artistic one.

Adler: You should have seen the people; one had to take the people out of the wings in the opera house, because everybody who worked backstage wanted to watch and hear Leontyne. I cannot remember attending a performance where anybody sang the way she sang that night. Really out of this world.

Luciano Pavarotti's First Radames

Pfaff: What about the risk of having Pavarotti sing his first Radames in your last season?

Adler: Well, you see, I have taken many risks with Mr. Pavarotti. One risk is that Mr. Pavarotti is so busy, he postpones studying roles until very close to [the time of] his first performance. I think I mentioned before that I sometimes had to send a coach to his place on the Adriatic Sea in Italy before our season opened.

But he himself has said that he liked San Francisco for trying out new roles, and from what I hear, he's said Radames now is one of his best roles. But Radames, as we all know, is a very difficult role, and you have to get it into your voice--preferably not in the last few weeks before a performance. So he was not quite prepared yet for this role--although he had moments, which only Luciano can do--and I don't think it's the wrong role for him. It's a role where his figure works; I think he didn't look badly at all. One problem is that "Celeste Aida" comes immediately at the

beginning, and there is no time to warm up onstage because there is [little time] before "Celeste Aida." And that caught him by surprise. As we all know, Pavarotti always gets better during a performance.

But you will recall that Luciano sang not only his first Radames here, he sang several other roles here for the first time.

I always wanted him to sing La Forza del Destino, but he considers Forza an unlucky opera and won't touch it. He never wanted to sing the aria in concert with me. I think he sang the duet with the baritone, "In quest' ora" once, but it went so far that, when I had concerts with him, and I conducted many concerts with him, he never wanted me to do the Overture to La Forza del Destino. He said, "That brings us both bad luck."

Pfaff: I would have thought he'd have a tremendous success with the aria.

Adler: He would have--imagine the last scene! He would have outsung the soprano in that last scene. It's a role that, in my book, really lies in his voice, but everybody's entitled to his idiosyncracies.

Pfaff: For all the attention that was going to be focused on this Aida, what with it being on television and Price and Pavarotti, did you feel you were taking a risk by hiring García Navarro? It was his American debut.

Adler: I think that Navarro had been specially recommended by Domingo, Caballé, and Berganza. But he was too young for it, at that time at least, and he had problems. He was an extremely modest and nice man.

But you really never know. Of course, those who recommended him are Spanish, but there was also someone else who had sung with him whose judgment I trusted. All right, you take a chance, and you think, "Aida; Aida is really not the most difficult opera." Other operas are much more difficult: Trovatore, for instance, is a much more difficult opera than Aida. To make something out of Trovatore demands much more insight into the not-obvious, while I feel that Aida is quite obvious. Of course, you expect, when someone conducts Aida, that he has the talent to hold great forces together, because that's what you have to do.

Director Sam Wanamaker and Designer Douglas Schmidt

Pfaff: What was your thinking behind hiring Sam Wanamaker, who I believe was the director of this Aida?

Adler: Sam Wanamaker had directed opera at Covent Garden and in Chicago very successfully; one of the operas he directed was La Forza del Destino. But I wouldn't have given Aida to him a second time. He may be a very fine artist and director, but to handle an opera where there are scenes with masses of people, like in Aida, was just not up his alley. His demands regarding the placement of the chorus and all that were not practical.

The problem with Wanamaker was that he made some demands that were, visually and technically, very hard to realize. I haven't seen the last Aida here; I don't know what they did with the Triumphal Scene, but some of the placements of the main characters were not quite what they should be.

I saw the other day a color photograph of Die Walküre in a San Francisco Opera program magazine, as designed and directed by Wieland Wagner. Practically nothing on the stage, but it was so beautiful and overwhelming that I thought, "How on earth did this man do it?" But there, again, as we have said, Wieland without Wieland doesn't work, and even if we tried to do such productions now, we couldn't. But there is really nothing on stage: the famous oval, the beautiful blue background, and Brünnhilde and Siegfried are far apart. Even in the photograph it jumps out at you.

Pfaff: Was this Aida production as costly as it looked? It looked absolutely massive.

Adler: Yes, it was a costly production. In Aida, the costumes are very expensive to do. Going back to the fifties and sixties, I guess, we did some Aidas here with utmost simplicity, and it worked, but it was, again, Wieland's style without Wieland. I must add that I saw a Wieland Wagner Aida in West Berlin that I didn't like at all. But the Aidas here worked. We had nothing, practically, on the stage but some--what do you call it?

Pfaff: Risers?

Adler: Yes, some kind of risers and a couple of curtains, and the famous blue side-maskings. But it worked. It must have been in the late fifties [1957], when Leontyne Price, who sang the pre-dress rehearsal of Aida, had to sing a benefit for the Philadelphia Symphony with Ormandy and left before the last scene. And then,

Rysanek, who alternated with Price in those Aida performances, sang the dress rehearsal, and Leontyne sang the first performance.

Before the last scene she asked for the stage director, a gentleman called [Carlo] Piccinato, and said to him, "Maestro, I must ask you something." He said, "Leontyne, you are so wonderful; don't ask me, don't ask me."

She said, "But, Maestro, how do I get in the tomb?" She had never rehearsed the last scene in the set!

But it is not always the abundance of sets and costumes that make the effect. You can reach your goal and achieve beauty with simplicity. Sometimes, as was the case in the Aida of Wanamaker and Schmidt, you just have to let them do what they want, otherwise nothing at all will come out of it, and at least there were lots of colors, you remember: the countless alabaster columns, I forget how many he wanted. We cut back and there were still too many, and nobody could move on the stage.

Pfaff: Was all that lighting from the inside?

Adler: Yes.

Pfaff: They were very beautiful.

Adler: They were.

A Sponsor for Aida

Adler: I had a sponsor for that performance,² and, as I have always done when I have a sponsor, I kept him informed. When I realized that we couldn't do it within the budget, I went to the sponsor, and I had him listen to some technical discussions so that he was fully in the picture. I made my confession and told him I couldn't do it with the monies I had said I could do it with, that I would need more, and I got it.

That is very important, I believe; the involvement of a sponsor from the very beginning. Let him see the rough sketches; let him see the development. If he feels a part of that, then he will enjoy the financial help he is giving. It's not only asking for bucks.

²Officially listed as "a friend of San Francisco Opera."

Pfaff: This was not the first time you had done television, but it was the first time you had done live relay to another situation, I think it was to Civic Auditorium in that case--

Adler: It was. It wasn't ideal, but it drew such an audience that we tried it. It's an emergency save, but I don't think it was artistically satisfactory at all.

Pfaff: Was your reason just to allow that many more people to see it?

Adler: We had such demands for tickets that I decided to try it. There were quite a few people. We sold it rather well.

Wozzeck and Sir Geraint Evans

Pfaff: I just want to talk quickly about two other productions from your final season that were sort of reprises, and important reprises. One of them was the Wozzeck, with which you had such a tremendous success. This time it was [Sir Geraint] Evans directing and singing the title role.

Adler: Geraint was very anxious to direct it, because he had the feeling he didn't want to sing too much longer, and he felt, perhaps, if he couldn't sing, he could direct. But it's not always the case that a singer--even with his enormous knowledge and intelligence--is the best director, especially if he plays an important leading role.

I never believed that a singer performing a leading role in an opera should also direct it, although it has been done very frequently. Of course, Wozzeck is such a fabulous piece that many things work by themselves. This is not the case with Lulu, which is much, much more difficult, but Wozzeck is clear-cut.

Geraint was, for me, the Wozzeck. He was incredibly brilliant, and he gave all he had to give. In spite of the fact that Falstaff --on account of the costume and the stomach you have to carry and whatnot--is a much more tiresome role, it's a rather shorter role. Geraint wore himself out in Wozzeck. I'll never forget the first time we did it with him and Marilyn Horne. It was one of those special things.

Pfaff: Did you say something earlier about--not this session, but an earlier session--about not having liked Rennert's work in the pit? I thought it was very, very good myself--

Adler: Oh, Wolfgang Rennert.

Pfaff: Yes.

Adler: You see, when you say Rennert, I think first always of Günther Rennert, his brother. I had heard a lot about Wolfgang Rennert, not from his brother, and I wanted to try him once. For me, he was a very sensitive conductor. I think he had some technical problems, because the orchestra didn't play as well under him as they play, for instance, under Gerd Albrecht or some others.

I heard him once with the East German Opera, conducting Walküre in Paris. That was very interesting, because I knew him, and this performance by no means expressed what I thought would be Rennert's way of expressing himself or expressing Walküre. I think that Wozzeck, actually, was very good. The Arabella [of 1980] left questions, but Arabella is a very difficult work, and it's technically very, very difficult. And, let's face it, Wozzeck is a much better work than Arabella, if you want comparisons. I like Arabella, and I can't understand why it has been called a poor man's Rosenkavalier. We didn't do justice to Arabella here. I borrowed or rented the set from another opera house and it was awful. Do you remember this tinsel junk in the ballroom scene, which looked like a poor Christmas decoration?

Pfaff: I was swept away by the cast you had.

Adler: Well, the cast was very, very good; there is no doubt about that. Who was Zdenka?

Pfaff: Barbara Daniels, singing like a dream.

Adler: She was very "nourished."

Pfaff: Very what?

Adler: Well-fed. But she sang beautifully. You know that Barbara Daniels, who was presented here quite a few years ago, has become very successful in Germany and also at the Met. She sings all over now.

I would have liked to do more Strauss, although the other Strauss operas don't have the same quality, perhaps. Die Liebe der Danae, you know--in Santa Fe they do it, but it's not a real success there, either.

The Capriccio [1963] worked, but it was not the success it would have been in a German opera house. Of course, there's a natural language barrier.

I was at the first performance of Intermezzo that was given in Vienna with Lotte Lehmann. I saw Josephslegende in Vienna, too, and Strauss had Marie Gutheil-Schoder--she sang the Färberin in Die Frau ohne Schatten; she sang Salome; she sang Elektra, and so forth--but he let her dance or do the pantomime in Josephslegende because he thought so highly of her.

She was very, very good. She was brought to Vienna by Gustav Mahler, who I am pretty sure heard her in a small, German opera house as Lola in Cavalleria and had such a wonderful impression of her that he brought her to Vienna. She sang--besides the roles I have already mentioned--Tales of Hoffmann, Carmen--she was a famous Carmen--Octavian, and I think she was one of the first Octavians of Strauss. She sang the Composer in Ariadne.

First Mahler, then Strauss, had the highest opinion of her. It was never a great voice, but it was a voice with which an artist like Gutheil-Schoder could do a great deal. One accepted practically everything from her because she was such an artist. Her most famous roles were [those of] the Strauss operas and Carmen.

It's hard to believe it was possible to hear within a couple of weeks [Maria] Jeritza's Salome, and then Gutheil-Schoder. Gutheil-Schoder's talent was completely overwhelming--she was much more intellectual [than Jeritza]. The only thing I don't think she succeeded with was the Brunnhilde.

Pfaff: Jeritza?

Adler: Yes, Jeritza. She tried both the Walküre and the Siegfried Brunnhilde. Jeritza and Lehmann alternated the Sieglinde, but somehow the voice of Jeritza wasn't quite suited to it; she belted out her lines with a glory that was unbelievable, and that you cannot do everywhere in Die Walküre. But I am pretty sure she sang both, and in my recollection, I heard her both as Brunnhilde in Walküre and in Siegfried. Her Sieglinde was unforgettable, as was her Elisabeth in Tannhäuser.

Lehmann sang much longer than Jeritza--and it may be hard to understand how one could be enthusiastic about both, but one could. That, incidentally, strengthens my opinion that one can reach a goal by different paths, the different paths in this case being used by opposites like Lehmann and Jeritza.

Lucia di Lammermoor and Ashley Putnam

Pfaff: One groupie question about your last season. It was with the Lucia. My understanding was that Ashley Putnam was not your first choice, but rather the singer that you ended up with. I was wondering what you felt about her as Lucia.

Adler: Who was my first choice?

Pfaff: I don't know; I had just heard that she was not the invited artist and that she came later. Maybe she was the invited artist; what was your feeling about her Lucia?

Adler: Putnam was very fashionable in those days. It wasn't a big voice, but somehow she had moments when she was superior to everybody, in her expression, you know?

There are only two conductors I liked for Lucia. One was Toscanini, and the second one was Kurt Adler. I did a Lucia, with a cast which was certainly not a top cast, in Marseilles several years ago, and the results were very good. The amazing thing was that the orchestra, which at first thought, "Well, it's an oom-pah-pah opera," played like they never played before, and they had fun. This is the second opera I learned from Toscanini, the other one being Meistersinger--I remember having heard Toscanini conduct Lucia with the La Scala ensemble in Vienna at the opera--who is the famous coloratura of Toscanini, of the early days? Italian. Pertile was a tenor. Famous--she was fat and not too attractive, but an unbelievable dramatic coloratura.

But I remember that he played Lucia with twelve double basses. And accordingly, naturally, something like twenty-one violins, or twenty-five. Unbelievable: the pit in Vienna was crowded, and it's an enormous pit. And it wasn't that the orchestra was loud, it was just that there was a rich sound. And obviously, the Vienna Orchestra is not bad, but I must say that, in my recollection, in my very young days--and it was in my very young days--not too much attention was paid to the oom-pah-pah operas. That means Lucia, Trovatore. They were played with smaller orchestras than here in San Francisco in those days. And they didn't have necessarily the top conductors conducting them and so on, and the results were not always the luckiest, although big singers sang; great singers. But the total artistic effort and impact was not what it can be. The Lucia of Toscanini is unforgettable.

Putnam had moments when she just really gave you everything you expected; you couldn't take more, it was so good.

Pfaff: The whole second act was very good.

Adler: Yes. And then she had moments where it wasn't good. But who was supposed to do it? Oh, yes! Gruberova, I think! Gruberova--who is now the top coloratura in the world--was to come here several times, and each time she cancelled, and she still cancels. She is not always where she [says she] has to go, or where she has contracts, you know, and she did it to me several times. She had an agent who promised me, "This time she will really come," but she didn't. She is now singing an excellent Violetta in La Traviata, and she has grown enormously. I haven't heard her now for a couple of years, but I regret that she didn't come. She had another child, and she wouldn't travel without the child and whatnot.

Pfaff: Well, I didn't know who it was supposed to have been, but I was very impressed with Miss Putnam.

Adler: My latest impression of Putnam--with whom was she living, Duesing?

Pfaff: No, Ellis, Brent Ellis.

Adler: I was conducting Trovatore in Tulsa with Brent as Luna and Leona Mitchell, and the tenor was William Johns. He sang Meistersinger and he sang Trovatore in Tulsa with Leona Mitchell. Ashley came to stay with Brent for a few days, and there was a big party at a very elegant country club. She outshone everybody at that party--she looked absolutely ravishing--and though she didn't sing, everybody sat there with open mouths, including me, because I talked too much that night.

But we had a wonderful time, and that's when I saw Ashley Putnam the last time. It was two or three years ago. I don't know why one doesn't hear too much of her, do you know?

Pfaff: Well, she's taken her career to Europe pretty much, but she just had a big success--

Adler: Where?

Pfaff: Well, in the smaller houses mostly, in Nice and Aix-en-Provence.

Adler: Well, Aix-en-Provence is not a smaller house; it is an important festival in France. Aix has very good things; top people.

Pfaff: At Glyndebourne she did Arabella.

Adler: Well, you see, she can. And such roles for her--she's very tall--are quite good for her appearance. But she can only sing them in smaller houses.

Carmen

Pfaff: Let's finish the discussion of your last season with the party after the Carmen. I'm wondering how that last Carmen felt to you.

Adler: Look, when you have worked in an organization for thirty-nine years --how should I answer this? You can't. It was, obviously, very difficult, except that it was my decision. I didn't have to go, but I wanted to, because I didn't want to have to raise funds anymore.

Teresa Berganza is a close friend of mine, and she had left, so Hanna Schwarz sang the last two performances without having rehearsed with Ponnelle, which made a big difference, and Domingo came in, because he asked to sing my last performance. So, there we were.

Everybody was extremely nice, kind, emotional, friendly. Some liked the idea that I was leaving, so they were friendly because I was leaving, and others were friendly because they liked me.

There was an enormous party on the stage, and I don't know if it was planned this way frankly, but as I mentioned Placido somehow ran the party--he became a master of ceremonies, which was very touching. There was an overwhelming moment when a piano came up in the pit with [Philip] Eisenberg playing the Rosenkavalier waltzes. The piano was a gift from the company to me.

Pfaff: This one?

Adler: Sure. Haven't you seen the plaque?

Pfaff: No, I haven't. [reads] "To Kurt Herbert Adler, from his friends and colleagues at San Francisco Opera, 15 December 1981." That's a beautiful piano. Is it a Steinway?

Adler: No, it's a Japanese piano, a Kawai.

Actually, it was not this piano that came out of the pit. We were living in an apartment--a kind of penthouse-flat--in San Francisco at the time, and this piano would have been too big, but since we had bought the house and we knew we had room for it, I was able to get this piano instead, which is a little bigger than the piano Philip Eisenberg played. He was dressed as Liberace.

Pfaff: Oh, he was dressed as Liberace? With the candelabra?

Adler: Yes, with the candelabra on the piano. At first I didn't realize that it was a gift to me, and then there were many, many other things. But the friendship of the people with whom I worked, and especially of those with whom I worked closely, is lasting, and I think, to me, it is one of the most important things that are left over from thirty-nine years at San Francisco Opera.

But on such occasions, you are enormously moved, and so I remember more about the crab feasts than I do about this. The stagehands give, every year at the end of the season, a luncheon on the stage with crab, and frequently they honored me on those occasions, because the stagehands were always my very special friends. The other day I was backstage, and they greeted me like a lost son or father. But a performance like that one takes a lot out of you. My little girl, Sabrina, sat for the first time in a box for the last part of the performance, and so on. It takes a lot out of you. There's a lot put in, but perhaps it's more than one human being can really retain.

You know, the chorus always was very special with me, and I don't know if you heard this, but when I led the rehearsal the other day for the Wagner concert in Stern Grove for the opera, they celebrated my eightieth birthday. They sang a song for me, with special words, and they gave me a sterling silver goblet--I don't know where they found it; I really must ask them. It is engraved with scenes from Lohengrin, Tannhäuser, and Dutchman, and, of course, a dedication to me. They always have been terribly nice to me.

XVIII RUNNING THE COMPANY

[Interview 19: July 5, 1985] ##

Season Planning

Adler: The planning of seasons and casting, etc., had to be done more and more in advance, which makes it very difficult because you have to commit yourself to a number of operas, to a number of performances and to certain casting which may be good for today but not necessarily for tomorrow.

Either there may be some singers who, contrary to expectations, are not anymore in the best of voice, or the new singers who show up are better. However, that one has to face because there is a trend. This early planning has become an international business.

Now if you ask about repertoire, this has also changed with the local situation. When I took over the San Francisco Opera in 1953, my predecessor had more operas on the repertoire than I thought was necessary, and he gave few repeat performances of each opera because he thought that too many performances of the same opera wouldn't sell.

Now to prove that this is not true takes some time and some guts and some gambling, and even if you cut down on the number of operas compared to previous seasons, you had to think about what the public will want and what can you sell. It isn't quite true that my predecessor was not interested in contemporary or unusual works, because he had Emperor Jones and L'Amore dei Tre Re in the repertoire. He really gave some operas that were out of the ordinary, but the majority of works one could sell in more performances were bread and butter operas.

But the selection of repertoire depends also on the artists you wish to present and who are available. Naturally, the public

has favorites and you have to make new favorites and balance your casts.

You have to find out how many performances your artists will be available to do; you have to watch how many rest days they need between performances, which depends naturally on the artists and the roles. You have to watch the rehearsal schedule, especially when you engage artists for more than one opera, because on the day when an artist performs, he will not rehearse. Some artists want to be free the day before a performance also.

If you can only schedule between ten and twelve operas, you have to think very closely about how you can balance the repertoire. You can't have too many German operas in one season, and you can't have too many French operas. There will usually be more Italian operas than any other because there are more of them from the past, but unfortunately, not contemporary operas.

Yet there came the time when Bohème wouldn't sell. There was hardly a season when Merola wouldn't have one or two performances of Bohème, but somehow the public got tired of it, and we skipped a season or two. It picked up again, but I tried to avoid giving the same bread and butter operas every year.

The Repertoire: Standard, American, and Contemporary Operas

Adler: You should include American operas if at all possible. You should include new productions. As we said before, contemporary opera has to be weighed very closely because sometimes it is prohibitive to present these works in a large house. That's why I moved Spring Opera Theater to the Curran. I started it in the opera house, but I realized that wasn't right. The move proved very helpful, because Death in Venice by Britten, for example, would never have had the success it did at the Curran in the opera house. We had an artistic success at the opera house with Britten's Turn of the Screw [1966], but to sell 3,250 tickets for a chamber opera is not easy. The conductor, Mr. Grossman, tried extremely well, and he made those thirteen musicians sound like a full orchestra; at least it was a satisfactory sound. But still, the opera did not fit in the opera house.

Pfaff: How did it sell?

Adler: Well, it sold, but not too well. At that time, contemporary opera did not sell that well. As I stayed on longer and longer and mixed the repertoire, we sold contemporary works better and better, and

the loss was so small that we could afford it. The board didn't object, because it was also important for the international reputation of the company.

Now the costs of presenting an opera on a smaller stage in a smaller house are also obviously less, so that means the risk is smaller, and it is easier to get people to help you financially when the production costs are not so high. There are other problems. For instance, the pit in the Curran Theatre was very small and we had to watch closely what we could present there and still seat all the musicians. Once in a while we had to seat some of them outside the pit, and it's something I don't like particularly, because there are always seats in the theater where you hear if the percussion is not in the pit.

Other big companies do this, too. For instance, I heard performances at Covent Garden where the percussion was in a box under the Royal Box. I wonder how royalty liked the sound coming up from below! But basically there is so much to be said for doing certain works in a smaller house with a smaller stage and a smaller pit under such circumstances.

Performing the Standard Works and Pleasing the Public

Pfaff: By the time I arrived on the scene, which was in 1970, your audience had pretty much come to expect every year in the fall season a Mozart and a Wagner. Was that a policy of yours, or did it just sort of come about?

Adler: No, I don't think it was necessarily a policy. But when you perform German standard opera, what can you do besides Mozart and Wagner? Okay, there is Fidelio, and you can give that every few years; there is Strauss, which in part is standard. Certainly Rosenkavalier is a standard opera and it can be given, if you have the cast, every few years. But an opera like Frau ohne Schatten is not standard; Ariadne is not standard; Elektra, Salome are not standard repertory and yet you had to give them.

So you have to sketch for yourself quite a few years ahead in order to satisfy the necessary standards and the demands of the public. You have to watch the subscription systems; you have to see that your subscribers don't get the same opera too often.

Now, you have a certain number of subscription series, and what we did, like most major opera companies do now, is have one series in which we present all of the operas on the repertoire.

Then you have series with three, four, and five operas each, and there you really have to keep track that you don't bore your subscribers. Naturally, there are always people who complain. If you have ten or twelve operas in a season, how can you please everybody? You can't.

I for one did not believe in questionnaires. I think questionnaires frequently give a wrong picture of what the public really wants, because only certain people fill them out. Others keep silent or they call or write you--they don't like to fill out questionnaires. You may get a certain image of the audience, but you have also the problem of giving what they've asked for. If you cannot do Cavalleria or Rosenkavalier until four years after that, they complain. So there are pros and cons, naturally, like everything else.

If you are long enough in the position of director, and I was fortunate to have been there long enough, you earn the confidence of the majority of the public, and it becomes easier to select the repertoire.

We have talked about how many performances you can give a singer, and when Maestro Merola died, a couple of weeks before the season in 1953, he had engaged Mario Del Monaco for fifteen performances in five weeks.

He cancelled, as we discussed, and it naturally created enormous difficulties because you have to get several tenors, because hardly any tenor wants to sing so many performances, or should.

Now you have to be very aware of how often you can repeat an opera--aware with a certain gambling instinct. We talked about balancing the repertoire, and I should perhaps talk about bel canto, because nowadays bel canto opera is really something the public likes to hear. Not only because they like the operas, but because certain singers are so much in demand in the bel canto repertoire that one has to take this into account.

The Rehearsal Schedule

Adler: When you plan the repertoire you have to make the rehearsal schedule at the same time. To make a good rehearsal schedule, you have to start from the opening of the opera and work backwards, and you have to think about how many hours of orchestra rehearsal you need--orchestra alone, orchestra with singers, orchestra with

singers and chorus, with and without action. How many rehearsals in the set and how many dress rehearsals. If you work your way backwards, you can get a fairly workable schedule. One has to have a certain nose for how it will go, and allow a little leeway, in case the hours you thought were adequate turn out not to be.

The same is true for piano rehearsals, and it starts with the San Francisco Opera Chorus, which until a very short time ago was not allowed by the union to rehearse in the daytime. The chorus had to rehearse and study the operas months ahead of time. As a matter of fact, I remember that at times the chorus had to start as early as February with musical rehearsals for the fall season in September.

There is a problem for the chorus director here, because the chorus can get bored with only studying. When I was chorus director, I made it a practice when I had the entire chorus once a week of telling them, "Today we will sing as if we were performing." The chorus loved it.

I remember a rehearsal of Boito's Mefistofele when I played a recording of the chorus section and then I said, "Let's sing it now, and we have to do better than the recording." Believe it or not, they did it that day, because there was an enthusiasm so spontaneous that it worked.

Such things are very important. If you treat choristers or orchestra players as people who have to just practice and learn all the time, they get annoyed. You must let them sing; you must let them play, and forget about certain things you want to correct on the very occasion and correct it the next time. I've had good experiences preparing operas that way, you know?

Comprimarios and Choristers

Adler: For the small roles you have to have comprimarios. Sure, you can put in singers who are more or less novices as comprimarios, but let me tell you, when I came here under Maestro Merola, three comprimarios stood out at the time. Thelma Votipka, Alessio de Paolis, and George Cehanovsky. That was the standard of the comprimarios, which elevated the total standard of the company, and so I have always hesitated to put too many young singers in danger by having them perform with very experienced people.

Another problem with choristers--if you want your best voices available in the chorus, they probably intend to become principals, solo singers. To make their years in the chorus--hopefully not too few and hopefully not too many, either--attractive, I think, is the duty of the chorus director and the director of the opera and the stage directors, and it can be done. But if a singer feels he is very good, he will have ambition, hopefully also talent, but certainly ambition, and then he will want solo roles. I was perhaps a little too cagey, actually, in giving choristers solo roles, and some of them resented it.

On the other hand, while I was chorus director, I think that the chorus was the star of the company. The choristers were proud being a member of the chorus and being presented the way they were. You know, at that time the public used to applaud choruses during performances. I remember Carmen performances where the cigarette chorus and the girls' fight chorus had applause. The opening chorus of the last act was applauded. The chorus was an element in the company which mattered very much, not only within the company, but also as far as the public was concerned.

Pfaff: Would you please rename the three comprimarios that you said you admired? Thelma Votipka--

Adler: Alessio de Paolis; you are too young to know this guy, he had enormous talent. And George Cehanovsky. He was a Russian; he is still alive. He is a Russian language coach at the Met at this time.

Pfaff: What was the point that you were making about the three, that you were very impressed with them?

Adler: When I came here [and found] such people were singing comprimario roles, I thought, "What a wonderful theater."

When I started rehearsing with the chorus, I thought, "What a horrible theater," and I told Merola after two chorus rehearsals or maybe after the first chorus rehearsal, "I want to leave." It's a true story. There was no discipline in the chorus, no attendance discipline--people were coming and going--no musical discipline.

I recall that a very nice guy with a rather nice tenor voice who was a vegetable man said to me after Toscanini did Rigoletto on an NBC broadcast, he said, "Maestro Adler, now I understand what you want from us." I was horrified. I mean, they had never heard of a short ending or a long ending or a cutoff; it didn't matter to them. They had great enthusiasm, but it was really an amateur group. After a few years, the San Francisco Opera Chorus became a high-standard operatic chorus, recognized by all conductors.

Pfaff: What was your subsequent practice in selecting comprimario singers? I ask because it's one of the things your company was famous for.

Adler: Well, it was a mixture of people; we certainly used some young people, and some comprimario singers who were known for certain roles. You get to know the people who sing certain roles.

I also developed some comprimarios who didn't mind too much to remain comprimarios with the San Francisco Opera. Naturally there were others who were ambitious and wanted to sing in Europe. That I tried to do. I put some singers whom I felt had the talent and could manage, for instance, in student performances.

When I took over, the San Francisco Opera Guild, which helped finance student performances, thought it was all-important that the kids heard the same stars in the performances that regular audiences did. Well, after some efforts it became evident that the kids liked the individual, and if a soprano was attractive as Madame Butterfly and sounded good, they didn't mind whether her name was Albanese or Kirsten or Price or some Miss Smith. So that gave me the opportunity to assign some leading roles to young singers, too, although not as much as one would like to.

Developing Young Artists

Adler: There is a question: as a young singer develops, is it better for that singer to sing comprimario roles in a major company or leading roles in a smaller company? It's very difficult. You cannot generalize. Some young singer will be better off singing comprimario roles in a major company and stand next to a superstar and watch what he does and does not do well, and then if he sings major roles, he sings them in a smaller company. But for others it is not a good idea to appear with smaller companies.

On the other hand, sometimes young singers were moving East to New York, hoping that agents would discover them and so forth, and that they would be heard by opera directors there. I always suggested they should go to the recitals of young singers, with whom they had the feeling that they possibly could compete, and learn from the mistakes of their equals. If they went to the stars' recitals, they sat there in awe and were perhaps even intimidated. Otherwise they might get arrogant and not understand that they cannot do what a Domingo or Pavarotti or Price can. You can learn from the mistakes of your equals more than from admiration of your superiors.

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Adler: It somehow reflects, without too much talk, what I did when I was at liberty to do what I thought would help, and I must say it with pride, and I hope not with arrogance, that there are many, many people out there who say that the way I ran the San Francisco Opera contributed more to the art form of opera than the way other companies were run. And that contributed at the same time to the prestige and the standards of the San Francisco Opera.

The Support Staff: Otto Guth and Paul Hager

Pfaff: One of the things I'm curious about in this matter of season planning and rehearsal planning is, since it's like working a gigantic jigsaw puzzle, how did you delegate the work of the people below you? To engage artists?

Adler: Well, frankly, to engage artists I listened to suggestions, and I had people all over whom I asked to keep their ears and eyes opened --all over the globe. And then I got suggestions and I looked for myself.

You know, you must stick your neck out and take responsibility and not have the feeling, "Well, I didn't know. Someone else engaged the singer and he's no good." I even took the blame if something failed and it wasn't my fault. Because I think--and I've said it before--democracy in the running of an opera company is no good. Sure, you try to delegate, but in the long run, it is one person who must be able to take the responsibilities and to do it. And if you do it--of course, I spent probably an average every day of thirteen or fourteen hours at the opera house--then the company members and the personnel see that the one who is responsible is doing it, they will also do more.

That's what I liked, and I had the support of all the people, and they liked to be told what was right and what was wrong. If you tell them in a friendly and assisting way, then they won't mind.

Mistakes you make, daily. But it takes a brain; you make them again, and you learn. But coming back to rehearsals, of course I had people with whom I worked, and I always had people checking. I took advice, and I did not mind criticism when I felt it was justified. And I followed suggestions. But then, you have to have a good ear in an opera company in every respect, not only for

music, for other things. You have to have also a good eye. Fortunately, I noticed when administrative mistakes were made.

Pfaff: Let me ask you again about your support staff--the artistic and administrative staff and the role they played in your season planning.

Adler: I had some people who came regularly for the season. I mentioned Paul and Ghita Hager, who for several seasons came regularly to the San Francisco Opera. Mr. Hager was an extremely bright man with all kinds of good ideas, good and bad, and I listened to him.

I had Otto Guth as my special personal assistant and friend, who unfortunately died too soon, and when he was in San Francisco, he was supervising the entire coaching system and all that, and he advised me and I took his advice. He was wonderful with singers and with everybody in the house. He was a diplomat, you know, although he didn't have to be a diplomat because he was so well liked. He was a fabulous coach--I don't think I have known a better coach.

I met Otto Guth in my last year in Europe in Reichenberg and he worked with me and for me over there. And when I was looking for assistants and heard that Otto Guth had arrived from Australia or India in New York, I said to the agent, who suggested him and said he didn't know him yet, "But I do, and he is engaged for good!"

So Otto came here, and as long as he lived, he was mine. He lived in New York and was only here for the season; he did extensive private coaching in New York and, of course, whenever I came to New York, he was around for me and he joined me for auditions, and we had sessions where we talked about planning and whatnot.

So between the Hagers, especially Paul Hager, and Otto Guth, those were really my main associate brainstormers. And I must say that Hager was quite instrumental in suggesting that the San Francisco Opera should do more contemporary work. Everybody has shortcomings; one of Paul's was that he was not necessarily skillful in getting the people he worked with to like him. But they respected him, and the end result was often very good. Unlike Otto Guth, whom everybody adored, you know?

At the same time Otto Guth and Paul Hager were good friends and got along very well, and Otto told Paul his frank opinion, which often was not in agreement. But such things work when you do it right. You must not be afraid to say what you think, if you find the right way to think, and I must say that in the long run

Paul taught me this. That if you believe in something, you cannot please everybody. Go ahead and do it if you think you are right.

Then, of course, we had other regulars and that goes for conductors and stage directors and singers, designers, choreographers--but you must make some changes, otherwise the company gets stale and the public gets bored.

Some people criticized Paul Hager, but I felt that what he contributed to the San Francisco Opera was important enough to me and for him to face the criticism. Perhaps it should be mentioned here that Herbert von Karajan engaged Paul Hager in a similar position for the Vienna Opera. So there were reasons why I supported him, and maybe it looks like a self-defense, which I think is not necessary, but perhaps it can be taken as an explanation.

Pfaff: To what extent did you rely on your own staff? For example, such people as, say, Richard Rodzinski, to help fill in holes, and plan schedules.

Adler: Well, Richard Rodzinski made suggestions which complemented my planning, and as I say, I always listened to others, and when it was good, I used it and thanked them for it and I hope I gave them enough credit. I think I must have done this, because all the people who worked closely with me are still terribly dedicated to me and they are my best friends.

Richard was really very skillful in this work, and I was very unhappy when the job at the Metropolitan was offered to him and he decided to go to the Met. I don't think if you ask him now he would say it was a wise move. For me it was not wise--I missed him terribly, because we worked together very well.

But I, perhaps, did not delegate things entirely. I would work a task out with others, and I should say I was slow in making up my mind and in finalizing things, but when I finally knew, then I wanted very, very fast work and I needed people who could keep in step with me. I think it was precaution that I didn't make up my mind quickly, but when I did, "All right! Let's not waste time--not too many words! Do it." And somehow we must have fared well.

More About Rehearsals

- Pfaff: When it came to something as complex as the rehearsal schedule for a season, did you actually work out all the little pieces yourself or--?
- Adler: Originally, yes, but afterwards to my recollection Richard worked out some schedules and he presented a rough draft, and then we sat and made it to order.
- Pfaff: What did you come to realize over the years about things that were absolutely essential? For example, your successor said it took him a whole season to learn that you have to have a technical rehearsal before each show goes on. [Laughter]
- Adler: Let's not discuss it.
- Pfaff: I just bring it up as an example. What kinds of things did you learn along the way about things that were necessary?
- Adler: Well, I think my estimates became more and more precise. Before you have done operas several times, you may estimate the number of rehearsal hours, for instance, wrong, or you allow "x" days for technical chorus rehearsals, and you start and you make mistakes. On the other hand, your technical director will usually tell you [rehearsal time] is not enough and then you must know enough about what is needed in order to tell him, "Well, you can have four days or six days but absolutely not more." Those things you learn. If you work with a designer and a stage director who understand the company, you will fare easier in not making mistakes.
- Pfaff: Is it not true that the rehearsal time given to individual operas went up dramatically in the time you were there?
- Adler: I think we talked about this, that Maestro Merola scheduled so many operas in five weeks that there was no time. It was not simply that the money wasn't there, but there was no time for detailed rehearsals, and also, in the beginning, the only place you could have full rehearsals was the stage proper, so there were very few rehearsals.

Gradually we acquired rehearsal space. We rehearsed first in some halls around the city. We rehearsed and built scenery in the Armory--a horrible place--and I worked with the technical staff to make it a little more pleasant for the chorus and the artists to go there. And they got used to it.

It had another advantage: that you could set up simultaneously several scenes from an opera. Like in a television studio or a movie studio, where you have various scenes in various spots on the sound stage, and we could do this because the Armory was so enormous. The place where we rehearsed was so big that the preferred people parked their cars inside and you would rehearse and all of a sudden someone would drive in with a lot of noise and such things. Also, it was ice cold or hot there and we had no heaters, no ventilators.

Well, that naturally supported my efforts to get a rehearsal building, and when we finally got a rehearsal building, I am only sorry that there was not enough money to have more than two rooms for staging rehearsals, and then of course the main rehearsal area, which is an absolute duplication of the main stage in the opera house in all dimensions, with the pit, so you can have orchestra rehearsals there. And it's an extended pit so you can seat a large orchestra there.

I hoped we would have some smaller rehearsal stages, too, because when you have a season like the San Francisco season you have to rehearse, I would think, a minimum of three operas--sometimes four--at the same time, and it's cheaper to have the different rehearsal areas and to move things from one area to another. To take down sets and replace them [on the opera house stage] costs an enormous amount of money.

Traditionally a conductor will say to you, "You don't give me enough rehearsal." A stage director will say it. And they frequently are right. But if they know you and have confidence in you and in the company, they will, in most cases, find a way to do with the rehearsal time they have, and with no waste of time.

I spent a lot of time in rehearsals of all kinds, in order to make sure there was no waste of time, and everybody knew this. It was nothing special when I showed up at a preliminary staging rehearsal in some room or onstage. Of course, I attended all rehearsals on the main stage and the main rehearsal stage.

But I watched what the stagehands were doing, and I talked about the number of stagehands, and then you always engage extras. I stuck my nose into the planning and said, "How many stagehands do you need to put Meistersinger on?" If the technical director said, "Fifty-two," I said, "Oh, come on, we can do it with thirty-six." And such things--bluffing my way in the beginning--and then finally you know what you are talking about.

And then the same thing for chorus rehearsals--of course, I was so long the chorus director that I was usually very sure how

much time you need or how many choristers you need for a certain opera and orchestra.

The problem with the orchestra was that the normal pay is small, and you had a problem seating more than, give or take, seventy musicians in that pit; there was not much space for more. If the strings have no space to bow, it doesn't make much sense to add and add strings, because they will not give you the full power. I had to enlarge the pit for works which needed a large orchestra--only in my last years--and I found it was cheaper to pay the stagehands to take out the two rows of seats on the main floor to enlarge the orchestra and to [put them back] when you have the smaller orchestra. Now it is the practice to leave the larger pit, which is probably to some degree an advantage, because they have more space when there are fewer musicians, but you lose "x" seats to sell. And since I sold, with the larger number of seats available, up to 98 percent, it was cheaper to pay the stagehands.

And again, I was told it took so and so many hours to change from the small pit to the large pit, but I watched this, and I talked to the technical director and it ended up they could do it at least twice as fast as I was told it could be done. It wasn't that it was done slowly deliberately, but it became known that in the company, one has to do the best one can do.

The same was true in changing scenery during rehearsals. Union regulations demand a certain break time, an hour, an hour twenty minutes--it's different for the chorus and the orchestra. Now, you have to plan with the technical director, so that scenery changes can be made in the time the chorus and the orchestra have their breaks. If it takes much longer, you lose rehearsal time, because the clock runs and the chorus and orchestra will have to have the next break anyhow, and there one has to learn how to do it. You have to watch very closely how long will it take to rehearse the next section, the next act, and coordinate it with the necessary break. You learn those things.

Pfaff: Did all your operas have a full rehearsal on the stage prior to the opening?

Adler: OHHHH--of course! Not one--more than that. The practice usually was to have orchestra rehearsals alone--the sitzprobe--with the singers sitting in front of the curtain and singing with the orchestra and sometimes with the chorus. Then came action rehearsals, first with piano, then with orchestra. Then came one or two dress rehearsals.

For the dress rehearsals you have to work with the technical director and lighting designer and stage director to find out what

the minimum is, I regret to say, they will need for lighting. Of course, they will light first without the singers--they have some supers walking the sets so they can see how people look in the lights, but then they need to run the cues and one has to negotiate with them what one can do and not force them to do with too little, because lighting has become an art.

The San Francisco Opera, when I took over, had nothing but the outdated main switchboard of the opera house which was built in 1932, and had to go until '53. Gradually, I added units and then we got the contemporary switchboard which, naturally, was obsolete in a year or two again, because nowhere have we made more progress than in stage lighting systems.

I told you about Germany, where so many new opera houses were built, and all with modern stages and at least three additional stages and the modern lighting equipment and all that, and we were dealing with a 1932 institution! I've mentioned that the opera house had not been planned as an opera house where you would present your own productions; it was meant to present only road shows. Companies would come in with ready-made shows, so there were no rehearsal places, no offices for administrative staff, and we had to take away some dressing rooms for office space.

Expanding the Opera House: 1980-1981

Pfaff: What about rehearsal space for the chorus?

Adler: A dressing room with costumes hanging there is not a rehearsal room for anybody, because the air is terrible. Naturally the opera house had no air conditioning either. They had some air-cooling system which still isn't very good, but the only rehearsal room was the old chorus room, which was inadequate in shape and size for chorus rehearsals, really. It is now, incidentally, the space which was assigned for the Archives for the Performing Arts. They'll make a go of it, but it won't last. They already have a lot of stuff which they cannot set up there because it's too small and they need more space.

Pfaff: Where is this space in the house?

Adler: It's on the south side of the building, on the fourth floor. There was only one bad freight elevator originally to get up there--that was another problem. But it was the only rehearsal room! In the earlier days, we used the chorus room for ensemble rehearsals when we had more than two or three singers, but if there were up to

three or four singers, they had to rehearse in a dressing room, which was very bad, and not very sanitary either.

Pfaff: No, I can imagine.

Adler: Well, I suppose all this helped me to get the rehearsal building in 1981. But if you didn't watch, every day something else was cut out [of the plans], because they were afraid they couldn't raise the money and most of the available money was put into Davies Hall.

But the addition to the opera house was very important, because there we had office space and rehearsal rooms. I don't think that the new chorus room is ideal, but it certainly is much better than the old chorus room, and it has a ballet room.

The ballet had no space in the opera house but the stage for rehearsals. Now there's a ballet room on the top floor--not a very good one, but it is there, and there are coaching rooms. But there is not really a good ensemble rehearsal room. There is only one big room, and it is a shape which is not ideal, so now the chorus room is used for ensemble rehearsals when it's free.

Staying Within the Budget

Pfaff: What can you say in a general kind of way about your techniques for staying within budget, since you were famous for doing it?

Adler: Being cheap.

Pfaff: [Chuckles] First of all, tell me how unique it was to stay within budget?

Adler: I think it was unique. I do believe that most opera companies have problems staying within the budget, or their budgets have enough leeway that they have no problem staying within it. I couldn't ask too big a budget of the board. They trusted me, and I learned that when you always tell a board the truth, they will go with you and they will trust you.

You know the famous story of a treasurer who, in my very first years, complained that something had been purchased that was terribly expensive. I apologized and I said, "I have to take the blame for it. It was I who authorized it, and I think I was wrong. And I am very sorry about it." It was at a board meeting. "But ladies and gentlemen," I said, "I am afraid I have to tell you I

will make the same mistakes in the future, too. Because if I don't make mistakes, I wouldn't be human and you couldn't afford my fee."

The same treasurer who scolded me for spending this money helped me get a fairly large appropriation a few years after that. There was a project which was expensive, and the treasurer said, "What Kurt wants is very beautiful, and I think we must support what is beautiful. I move that we approve this expense." The same man had been horrified a few years before.

Pfaff: What was this project?

Adler: I frankly don't remember, but it was a production project; that much I know. You asked me how I did it. The board was not in my way; it was very rare that the board would interfere with something I wanted to do.

Opera in Los Angeles

Adler: I think we talked about the Los Angeles season, which didn't materialize before I left. The reason it didn't was that in Los Angeles money was not made available for the increase in the budget which was caused by inflation. The project was signed and discussed three or four years ahead of time and we had inflationary sums in the budget, but inflation was much higher than anticipated, and it wasn't enough.

It is a circle. Naturally, while the inflation was so high, the unions came and demanded more and more money for stagehands, makeup department, the chorus; and the comprimario singers worked on a scale, and so on. Everything went up more than anticipated, because inflation was higher than anticipated. And those are things that can't be avoided--the only thing to do would be to cancel the season. However, to cancel a season, in my opinion, is suicide. Because if you are in the process of growing, as the San Francisco Opera was in length of seasons, in standards, in national importance, international importance--if you skip a season, it's very difficult and very costly to revive the company.

In negotiations we sat a couple of times in the offices of various mayors and talked to the union people. In the long run, they believed that I was right, and they gave, and the president of the opera, and the lawyer of the opera, who in the beginning might have thought I was all wrong, believed that it was very important to come to an agreement with the unions and not to close. Closing, in my book, is never an answer. In the long run, it costs more

than what the demands are. And if you succeed in getting the cooperation of the unions and the personnel, it will not cost you more, even if you accept some conditions which you do not want to accept.

Artists' Fees

Pfaff: You are similarly famous for being able to keep singers' fees and the fees of other artists at something like a minimum. What were your techniques? How were you able to do that?

Adler: Well, it's not a technique. I mean, you must run a theater in which the singers like to appear, both for artistic reasons and for personal reasons. If they like to come to the city, and they like the life they lead there for "x" weeks, and they like the way they are treated at the opera house, then they may give up [something]. In most cases I succeeded in getting them to come for less money than they wanted to come for. Which, incidentally, also means getting their agents to understand and cooperate. That is not easy because at a higher fee the agent profits, since he's paid on a percentage basis.

You know, I read in the paper--you read a lot in papers--that artists didn't like me. Well, I don't think this was quite true. I never argued with the press unless it was really essential, but for the things I let them write, it wasn't true.

There were only two cases where the press really was right about people who were not engaged. I regret to say there were two singers who I was asked by superiors not to re-engage. I engaged them later on, actually, but basically it's not true that the singers wouldn't come here because they didn't like me; it's nonsense.

Pfaff: It seems like that's in fact why they came in many cases.

Watching the Budget

Pfaff: You mentioned there were two occasions in which you were not able to stay within budget. What were those two occasions?

Adler: One year [during William Orrick's presidency, 1971-73], the company had borrowed a lot of money from a bank, and the bank would not

permit the company to have a higher budget. I don't remember the exact amount; I think it was two million or something like that for the season. And they came up very late, and I tried to tell the president, "Look, if they would say, 'The loss cannot be beyond 'x' dollars,' that is one thing. But when they say, 'The budget cannot be above a certain amount,' I don't understand it."

Well, there was no way out; it had to be done. So I had to give up the last week of the season, which were only repeat performances, but I had counted on a near-sellout of each repeat performance, and the cost of the performances was lower than the receipts. In other words, I expected to recover some of the deficit during the last week. But the only way was, as I say, to cut the week, and we did.

And as it went, all the performances of the operas that were to be presented in the last week were completely sold out, so there was no doubt we would have sold out the repeat performances also. The president was fair enough that, for the next couple of years he said in every board meeting that if he could have followed the suggestions of Kurt, we would now be some several hundred thousand dollars better off. It's true.

But, again, you must talk to the technical director. You must talk to the chorus director. You must, yourself, or I did myself, supervise the orchestra's rehearsal hours. The orchestra costs a lot of money, and you must come to an agreement with the conductor about how many extra strings you use, because that is always a problem. In San Francisco the regular orchestra has only twelve first violins and nine seconds, seven violas, six or seven celli and five double basses--not a very strong string section.

If a conductor wants more for a Strauss or Wagner opera or for an Aida or whatever, he must be able to decide how many extra strings are needed, and how many are affordable. Unfortunately, sometimes you can afford fewer than you really need. That hurts; it's very sad and difficult. You have your hours of sadness; your performances of sadness where you know if you could have afforded something more, it would have been better.

Pfaff: What about keeping costs down around the opera house itself? I ask because a former assistant of yours who said this in total admiration said you knew where every pencil was.

Adler: I think you have to watch. And if the people know that you watch what is being used, then a minimum of pencils will be taken home.

There are always some people who like to make long-distance calls, especially in the evening, so I had locks put on the

telephones, which at that time were much more expensive than now. If people know that you watch every buck, they spend less.

For instance, the purchases in the costume department: If you are with the costume people from the very beginning when they're making the costumes--and that means not only new costumes for new productions, but also new costumes for old productions--and you talk about the material used and how much decoration, how fussy you can get, and if they know all this--it's like the mistakes I made in the production of The Marriage of Figaro, when with the approval of the technical director, we cut too much. Leni Bauer [Bauer-Ecsy] was the loser, because it was said that the production wasn't very nice.

But I've tried to find out how much it cost to get a really good new production--not more and not less. There was no throwing away of money. I think we talked about the hourly wages I paid in the costume shop and in the scenery shop. Hauling scenery back and forth was expensive, so I watched that we didn't bring scenery from the technical shop to the opera house and back again unnecessarily, you know, and such things. But you have to have your long nose in everything. And if the people know this, they don't necessarily want to cut your nose off.

But take an example: there was a new production at the Metropolitan that needed a lot of costumes with fur trim, and they used real fur. We were doing the same production at the same time, and for our production there was a question, fur, not fur, and I said, "We can't afford it." Well, not only did the real fur not last as well as the artificial fur, but the artificial fur wasn't noticed. In the big theater you don't notice such a thing.

In a case like that you must depend on your people--your designer, your costume people--to say, "You are right. Nobody will notice that this is not real fur." You see? Such things; it's an example. Our costumes cost only a part of what the Met costumes cost for the same performance.

Pfaff: What was the production that called for fur?

Adler: I don't want to say. They may still use this production, and why should the public suddenly say, "Oh, it's not real fur." [Laughter]. Especially if they haven't noticed it up to now, you know?

But, you see, Tim, it's an endless chain. You ask some very good questions. The pencils--why sure, pencils. The stationery--I talked about stationery, that we didn't waste stationery. It is a practice to give artists stationery, of course, but you don't give

them unnecessary stationery, hundreds of letterhead stationery get lost and then you have to print new stationery constantly.

We talked about the cost of brochures, for instance, and I very much supervised that. Of course you must decide whether a more expensive brochure really sells more tickets, or if it is only a prestige thing to have expensive paper, expensive print, and expensive colors.

I remember when Maestro Merola looked at some brochures at the time I was his assistant and said to the printer, [imitating an Italian accent] "Hey, listen to me! In Naples we used to wrap the fish in such paper! This is no paper for a brochure!"

I also stuck my nose into the advertising that would be put in a brochure, and what firms we would accept. If I had the feeling that something would be received badly by the public, we had to forego an advertiser, and then you have to be polite and see that he doesn't get upset and so on. Or maybe I didn't spend enough money on advertising at times. Maybe if I had done the Ring this year, I would not have spent as much, and maybe we wouldn't have sold out. But then it's a question: did the smaller box office cost more than the advertising? That is the thing; it's guesswork. It's very nice to be able to say, "Well, we sold out twelve performances by February or March," or whatever it was, but [in terms of] the budget, it's another question. Publicity is not cheap.

Scheduling Problems

Pfaff: Certainly not at that level. You mentioned one other thing you wanted to talk about earlier, about performance times and scheduling.

Adler: Yes. In San Francisco curtain time usually is eight o'clock, and there are shorter operas which can start later. Is it wise to start them later, or not? What do you do with a long opera? There are some long Verdi, Strauss and Wagner operas. Do you start them earlier, play later into the night, or do you force cuts? Now cuts are a problem with conductors, stage directors and so forth. All this takes work, and one has to have the authority to decide, if there is a dispute about it.

You have to learn about your public. As you know, I started the Wednesday subscription performance earlier because there were people coming from out of town, and they don't like to drive [home

too late]. Other people also like to come early for one reason or another, so it is good to have a subscription series that starts early.

The same problem on Sunday afternoons. In many cases, we had to call rehearsals on Sunday night after the matinee performance, because we didn't have enough free evenings when the chorus was available. So then you have to start [the performance] at one o'clock. Well, is one o'clock too soon? You have to ask yourself, are there people who go to church or who come from out of town and cannot make it at one o'clock? I discussed it with my advisors--I had Margaret Norton, for instance, who had a very thorough knowledge of the public, and who advised me about such things. She wasn't always right either, but I took the blame if she advised me wrong, naturally. Of course, the decision was up to me. But those are things one has to study.

We talked about intermissions. The union people, that means orchestra and chorus, have to have [a certain amount of] intermission time during the performance. You have to learn what the public really needs, and what the singers need. And then you have to watch how long the whole performance lasts. Now, the unions regulate the maximum length of a performance. If you perform longer, then you have to pay overtime to the orchestra, to the chorus, to the stagehands, to the ballet. It is really a matter of thousands and thousands of dollars.

Pfaff: It's in fifteen-minute increments as I understand it, isn't it, past a certain point?

Adler: I succeeded in getting fifteen-minute increments after midnight. Otherwise, it's half-hours, mostly. But they were cooperative. There are operas where you run over three minutes, five minutes, and it can cost a fortune. I really got the cooperation of the union. They wouldn't stick me, you know? There are some fifteen-minute increments and some half-hour increments now, but after midnight it used to be an hour.

But, again, you are dealing with human beings. There may be a delay because some stagehands got stuck in the change of scenery, and so the intermission has to be longer. It can happen. Or the conductor is slow. That happens.

There is a famous story about a performance of Meistersinger that ran two and a half minutes or something like that past midnight. So I said to the conductor, "Listen, do you know this cost me a fortune tonight?" And he said, "Why didn't you send me a note? You know, the last scene we were behind, and I could easily have sped it up." I said, "Okay, the next time."

The next Meistersinger performance, I sent him a note during the Prelude to the first act which said, "You are slow! You are going to run over again. Please!" That was given him at the stand, and he read it and laughed and laughed. He gave the note to the orchestra and it made the rounds of the orchestra during the Prelude and they just roared. He did not run over.

Getting the Curtain Up on Time: Watching the Clock ##

Pfaff: One thing the public appreciated was that when you said the curtain went up at eight o'clock, it went up at eight o'clock. How did you manage?

Adler: There had been a habit of not starting precisely [on time], and you know timing and precision are a part of music. So gradually, or radically, I don't remember any more, but I said, "Let's start on time, except when there is very bad weather, or some kind of practical problem." So we started on time, and the public got used to it and they came on time.

The same with seating people during the performance. They used to seat people all the time and those who sat there wanting to enjoy the music couldn't. That was stopped too, and at first there was some objection from some of the important people, but they realized it was a fair arrangement and it stuck.

La Scala and other Italian opera houses have a clock above the proscenium--I hate this, frankly, and I don't like it when conductors wear watches (although with Meistersinger it would have been helpful!). Oh, I realize the necessity of watching time, but I think it's awful.

When I was in Australia last fall, they stopped me six bars before the end of Fidelio when I was rehearsing the orchestra, and they wouldn't let me finish those last six bars. And it was a fast tempo, too! [Laughter]

Adler and the Staff

Pfaff: I'm interested that you landed on the word fairness, because a number of people I've talked to on your staff felt that one of the reasons you got the loyalty you did was that fairness was the rule for you.

Adler: I hope I was fair. This is something you don't know. But I tried, according to my conscience, and I hope my conscience is a fair conscience. When I blew up, and sometimes I blew up, perhaps often, I don't know, but when I did I tried to make a joke afterwards and put everybody at ease. I believe that humor is very much a part of running an organization successfully; especially when you want to be strict. Mix being strict with having a good sense of humor.

Pfaff: What did you ask of your staff?

Adler: First of all, precision. Maybe I should say first, dedication, and second, precision. And third, endurance. Endure the task, and endure me! [Laughter]

But if you can create a feeling within a company that when something goes well it's theirs, then you can make it work. You know, in this company there were choristers and even stagehands in the wings watching performances, and the joy when there was a good performance was general. Everybody was happy, and everybody had long noses when it wasn't a good performance. You cannot have only good performances.

The Importance of Opera Audiences

Adler: Recently I read a book by the secretary of Max Reinhardt, the famous producer I started with, and she wrote about how Reinhardt felt that the public was a participant in each performance. It depended often on the public whether it was a good or less good performance, according to Reinhardt, and I think that is so true. A performer, and that goes for an orchestra member or chorister as well as a singer, knows if it is a good audience, or one that is indifferent.

The subscription audiences--that was Tuesday and Friday nights when I took over--were made up of the people who had to go ten

times in five weeks, which I think is a lot, and it was said that those people were a rather indifferent audience.

So as soon as we had ten or eleven weeks, I had just one regular subscription series on Tuesday nights, and the people had to go only once a week, which they preferred. And this regular subscription audience then became a very interested and warm audience and the singers noticed it.

Pfaff: Because the subscription series audiences did tend to take on a certain character, how much did you have to take that into account when planning performances?

Adler: The regular subscribers got every opera on the repertoire--ten, eleven, twelve. And I watched this in terms of casting. The regular subscribers were the people who used to support the opera more than others, so they deserve more recognition and attention.

One must think back: There were families in San Francisco who supported the opera in San Francisco when it started in the early twenties--generously. Some of them have died, and the families may not be in the same financial position they were before. They were old forty-niner families, and I have always had the feeling that one must recognize the past, and I respected those families for what they did to get this opera company going.

I always mentioned it to the board; that one shouldn't really hurt people who couldn't afford to do as much any more. But if the younger generation was less interested than the previous generation, on the other hand, we had to try to get the interest of those newer generations. There is no reason why they shouldn't be interested. After all, isn't the opera situation as good as the baseball situation? [Laughter]

But those things you learn which become a practice, and your advisors know how you feel and know you sometimes have to change your mind. I think it is the privilege of the general director of an opera company to change his mind.

I remember once Maestro Merola changed his mind about casting, and the singer he took out asked for arbitration, because she knew he had planned to use her and then changed his mind. At that time the arbitrators were people who didn't know much about opera--they were respectable businessmen--and it looked bad for Maestro Merola.

I had testified and I asked to be heard again. I said, "Gentlemen, when the general director of an opera company cannot change his mind about casting, he cannot produce good opera." That did it; Merola won the case.

Pfaff: One thing that happened less often here than with other opera companies is the kind of change that is always put into the program: "We can change casts or we can even change operas." Did that happen?

Adler: I really had very few changes of repertoire. The worse change I remember is the one time when we had Lohengrin on a Friday and the Barber on a Tuesday--the regular subscription series--and the Elsa got sick and we couldn't get anybody to replace her, so we put the Lohengrin on the following Tuesday and the Barber on the preceding Friday, but that is the most radical change I remember. I don't think we ever changed an opera.

The Cover System

Pfaff: What about the practice of having covers?

Adler: Well, I couldn't afford covers and so I gambled a lot. But I made it. The closest call was the Jess Thomas story which we discussed. It was easier then too because everything was shorter range planning. Remember when Callas dropped out? I was able to go ahead with the same repertoire. Stella dropped out the same year, and Rysanek took some roles and others did other roles, and it was possible. Singers were used to closer planning, and so when there was a change, they were more cooperative.

In 1953, when I was artistic director, it was not only Mario Del Monaco who cancelled the fifteen performances Merola had engaged him for, but Dorothy Kirsten dropped out because her husband was ill. So I had to replace her. Licia Albanese was very cooperative and sang some of Kirsten's performances.

Domingo made his debut here in Trovatore as a replacement. He had sung a recital the day before in El Paso, I believe, and I suddenly had no tenor. I forget who it was who cancelled, but I called him and we were on very friendly terms, so he flew out and had this enormous success. But it helps if you make them feel at ease, both when you call and when they come.

Richard Tucker once held me up with a fee, and when he arrived --it was when Corelli cancelled the opening of Andrea Chenier and I brought Tucker in--I sent him one big dandelion to the hotel with a note: "I'm sorry that because of the tenor's fee for opening night the company cannot afford more." [Laughter] He told everybody.

Dealing with the Artists

Pfaff: You have done a lot of your business on the telephone. Is there something you would like to say in a general way about that?

Adler: I had a special relationship with the artists that made [dealing by telephone] possible. I traveled enough for the company, but without this I would have had to travel much, much more.

When I traveled to Europe, I made it a point to go myself and listen to the singers I was interested in. Once when I was in Cologne I went to Gelsenkirchen to hear a Tristan with Ursula Schroeder-Feinen. I was very much impressed by Schroeder-Feinen and I engaged her. Unfortunately, she ruined her voice early or she got sick, I don't know what happened, but she sang a very good Barak's wife in Frau. Gelsenkirchen wasn't a bad theater, in fact, Marilyn Horne came from Gelsenkirchen to do Wozzeck here. But if I go to Gelsenkirchen to hear Schroeder-Feinen and then I call her, there is already a certain satisfaction because I came there to hear her.

And then I almost always spent some time before a performance in the artists' dressing rooms--either before a performance or during intermission--and my presence was noted. I don't say that in an arrogant way.

Did I tell you the Suitner story? Well, his last performance was always the best. I noticed this and the next season when he arrived I went into his dressing room and said, "Maestro Suitner, you know that this is your last performance in San Francisco, yes?" "What?" And then we joked about it, and then before each performance I went to his dressing room and told him it was his last. [Laughter]

Again, a sense of humor used in the right way.

You know, we were talking about using young singers, and I heard Bernstein's Independence Day concert, and among the six soloists he had some excellent ones I didn't know. There is an excellent star conductor, getting along in years (excuse me, Lennie)--but he uses young singers on such an occasion.

Pfaff: Can you say something about what your ear told you was an important young singer? Walter Legge once wrote about having that single, identifiable timbre.

Adler: There are certain basic things that you must hear in a voice: the breathing and intonation must be right, and then comes more detailed things: the phrasing, the precision of the musical interpretation, the language facility. In an audition you watch for memory. The behavior on the stage--the audition attitude--all those things matter. Preferably you find a singer who is not stupid--not all singers are stupid. All those things add up and the more you hear the more knowledge about the art of auditions you get. And the more auditions a singer sings, the more he can control himself.

Auditioning is not easy and sometimes it can go wrong and you can make mistakes. There is no doubt about that--that is why I always tried to have someone with me at auditions in order to confer. The decision was mine, and often I selected people I was advised not to take. Often I was right--sometimes I was wrong.

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The Well-documented Maestro

By CAROLINE CRAWFORD

"Remember, young man, in the theater nothing is impossible."

Kurt Herbert Adler had been engaged only a short time in the Josefstädter Theater in Vienna when Max Reinhardt spoke these words to him. The year was 1925, and Adler had been asked to produce some music on short notice for one of Reinhardt's productions at his principal theater. If Adler thought the time too short for the assignment, he was persuaded otherwise by the stern and demanding director. His tasks during the three years with the Reinhardt theaters included everything from conducting the music for productions of plays by George Bernard Shaw and Carl Sternheim (the latter featuring a very young Marlene Dietrich) to composing music for Somerset Maugham's *Rain*, and when he left for opera posts in Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Italy he was convinced of the truth that in the theater everything was possible. He carried the Reinhardt injunction with him from Vienna to Chicago to San Francisco: it was a guiding principle during his twenty-seven years as administrator of San Francisco Opera.

The San Francisco Opera and the man who ran it from 1953 to 1981 are the subjects of an oral history being documented by the Oral History Office of the University of California's Bancroft Library. During the Adler regime, the company re-confirmed its position as a top-ranking international opera stage. In 1953 San Francisco offered a six-week Fall Season with twenty-five performances of

fourteen operas. By 1981, the Fall Season had doubled in length and nearly tripled in performances, and was only part of the roster of a much-expanded company that had added an international summer season, a summer training program, a full-fledged touring company, an innovative spring season for young American artists, and several additional performing affiliates. Opera was enjoying a heyday in this country—with regional companies proliferating and television bringing the art into millions of American homes—and San Francisco had become a kind of opera center. It was a prime training and nurturing ground for young American singers, and the Bay Area could claim more opera per capita than any other region in the country.

In all this booming opera activity, Kurt Herbert Adler was the undisputed czar. By his own admission, he did not believe in delegating responsibility to his hard-working staff: he oversaw every minute detail of the operations and in the last analysis he made every decision. "I don't believe too much in democracy in the theater," he said, and he clearly meant it. But the buck really did stop there, in the spacious white office on the fourth floor of the War Memorial Opera House.

Adler also said: "I think that the people who sit in offices only and don't participate in the practical operations of an opera company cannot be entirely familiar with the needs of the company." Anyone who worked on Adler's staff would recognize this as a colossal under-

statement. Adler was everywhere, talking shop with the carpenters or fabric with the costumers, looking in on the stagehands. He was omnipresent at rehearsals, scrutinizing every detail from the last chorister's shoes to the conductor's tempi. Says director/designer Jean-Pierre Ponnelle: "Where is the really fully professional theater director in the world today? ... You have very competent people for music, and in the theater you have competent people for staging, for administration, for fundraising, for publicity—but there is no complete personality, one who knows the problem from the last contrabass, from the last chorus part to the stage carpenter to the wig department; how to invite Mrs. X, and *not to invite Mr. X*. I think Kurt was the last product and the last representative of a really great era...."

Kurt Herbert Adler is central to the history, but he is not the only character. The history of San Francisco Opera begins with Gaetano Merola, who considered the city "my other Italy" and believed in its ability to support an opera company of its own. His first season took place in 1922 at the Stanford Stadium, where audiences of more than 10,000 came to hear the likes of Giovanni Martinelli, Bianca Saroya, and Léon Rothier at five dollars top; he ran San Francisco Opera

continued on p.65

Caroline Crawford is project director of the Kurt Adler/San Francisco Opera oral history.



San Francisco Opera Chorus 1948 group photo. Kurt Herbert Adler, at that time chorus director and conductor, is seated in the center of the second row.

STROHMEYER



Kurt Herbert Adler (extreme left) presents a commemorative scroll to Robert Watt Miller (extreme right) after a 1962 opening night performance of *La Bohème*. Gathered around them are (l. to r.) Dorothy Kirsten, conductor Francesco Molinari-Pradelli, Mary Costa, chorus director Vincenzo Giannini, Renato Cioni, Russell Christopher and Giorgio Tozzi.

until his death in 1953, and nearly all of the world's best-known singers graced his stage.

Also prominent in the cast of characters is Robert Watt Miller, long-time president of the Opera Board who fairly single-handedly provided the financial base on which the company was run and gave it the requisite social luster needed to sustain it; the staff who maintained company operations, the audiences that filled the Opera House and welcomed back the artists season after season, and not least the artists who created in San Francisco some of the most exciting hours of lyric theater anywhere in the world.

The Bancroft Library story is to be told by means of extensive tape-recorded conversations with those who made it: Adler, community leaders, labor leaders, opera staff, artists. Adler has already given nearly sixty hours of interviews (Timothy Pfaff, associate editor of *California Monthly*, has conducted most of these). Some sessions focus narrowly on such subjects as Adler's childhood and remembrances of his Viennese past, of Strauss and Mahler and the years spent observing and studying at the Vienna Opera. Other subjects include casting and the selection of repertoire, lighting, color in design and music, and specific personalities who were, in Adler's estimation, "right for their times": Paul Hager, Wolfram Ska-

licki, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, and an Adler protégé whose tragic death brought to a close a remarkable life and career—Calvin Simmons.

Other sessions are more rambling reminiscences about the great and near-great, the phenomenon of the operatic superstar, reflections on American musical theater and the state of opera in general.

Adler had the distinction of being called tyrannical, dictatorial, autocratic, but he was never boring, and his tape-recorded story is also never boring. He is as candid about his personal dislikes as he is about the things he did that were less than successful, about what frustrated and hurt and taxed him. He is less willing to philosophize about the famous Adler temper, except to say that it showed "artistic tension, which is good for success." He adds: "I was working so hard, I didn't have time to be sweet and nice. Maybe not the personality, but certainly not the time." Others who may have been subject to his temper have viewed it differently, but there is a kind of consensus that whatever it was, it produced exciting opera in the long run because it was coupled with a unique energy that translated into an extraordinary command of the business and a demand for perfection met by the man himself.

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Kurt Herbert Adler at home in 1961.

anecdotes has accumulated on tape: stories of Adler's summer apprenticeship with Arturo Toscanini in 1936, of conducting a broadcast performance of Bruckner's Fourth Symphony in Chicago in competition with President Roosevelt's Fireside Chats (Adler got better ratings); of auditioning Marilyn Horne on her wedding day; of Luciano Pavarotti singing lustily on the Bay Bridge at the request of a female taxi driver, and on and on.

Woven in with the Adler story are the oral histories of others: Jean-Pierre Ponnelle reflects on the Adler personality and theatrical vision and the very special relationship shared by the two men (Ponnelle is godfather to Adler's young son); Leonie Rysanek chronicles the changing company; Jess Thomas describes his early San Francisco training and meteoric launch from the Merola Program into the operatic stratosphere. Leontyne Price talks of what San Francisco has meant to her career, and of the man she calls "The President" (she carries with her three pictures: of Herbert von Karajan, "The Emperor," of Rudolf Bing, "The King," and of "The President"—Kurt Adler).

Miss Price's interview is a kind of a catalogue aria describing the qualities of the Company, of which she says: "You can't ask for a better operatic environment to perform in—it is artistically superior in every way." Of Adler, she says: "I think what Kurt brought to San Francisco from an artistic and cultural point of view is historical... His approach

to being an opera director and administrator is very much the way I approach my own life and career. I admire the strength that his priorities were ever constant; I respect it more than I can ever say... There's *nobody* like him, in my book."

Production Supervisor Matthew Farruggio and former Company Administrator Ruth Felt, veterans of the Opera staff, explore the Adler inner sanctum and go into some detail about the outfitting of an opera company on a shoestring—as it was done in the old days. James Schwabacher and Philip Eisenberg discuss the musical side of opera production and members of Adler's family supplement his interviews. Adding to their stories will be others whose memories go back to the 1930s and 1940s.

The profound and long-lasting involvement of Robert Watt Miller has been documented by a number of interviewees, including his widow, Mrs. Sheldon Cooper, and R. Gwin Follis, close friend and Board Chairman from 1971 to 1984. Stagehands to this day remember Mr. Miller scrutinizing the operation from backstage in top hat and tails: elegant, powerful, and knowledgeable about all things operatic. Colin Harvey, a veteran of forty-six years with the Company (chorister, comprimario and chorus librarian; he last performed on stage in 1982) has been a window into the Merola years.

Later decades have been covered by Board presidents Prentis Cobb Hale and Walter Baird, who direct their attention to

the realities of the 1960s and 70s and the expansion of the Board to meet those realities—a fairly comprehensive look at the Bay Area social history.

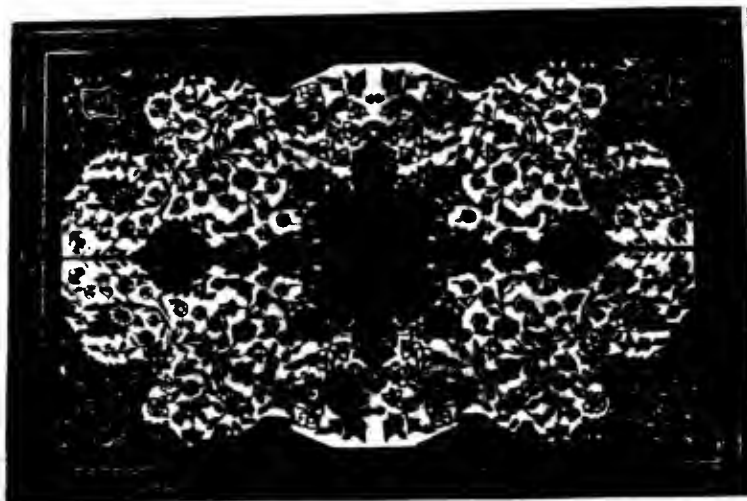
There are many interviews to come: Invitees include Opera General Director Terry McEwen, Birgit Nilsson, Licia Albanese, and former staffers Richard Rodzinski and Ann Farris Darling; among those who have written indicating their interest in taking part in the history are Dorothy Kirsten, Sir Geraint Evans, Jon Vickers, and Elisabeth Schwarzkopf.

The Oral History process is uncomplicated. The interview is structured in that questions are presented to the interviewee, but the tenor of the discussion is informal and the informal tone is maintained throughout. A transcript is made of the tape recordings, sent to the interviewee for editing, and from the edited version the final version, with chapter headings and indexes, is compiled and bound into book form for distribution to requesting reference libraries. Interviewees may request that any or all of their materials be sealed for an indefinite period of time. The methodology of producing oral histories is recent: Allan Nevins, Civil War historian, began putting together oral histories at Columbia University in the late 1940s. Willa Baum pioneered the first histories on the West Coast in the early 1950s with a history of the University of California. Since that time the technique has been used and popularized by Studs Terkel (*Working, Hard Times*), Merle Miller (*Plain Speaking*), Oscar Lewis (*The Children of Sanchez, La Vida*), and Vivian Perlis's histories of American composers produced through the Yale University Department of Oral History. Considered a poor relation by some historians, Oral History is coming into its own as an accessible and first-hand accounting given by those closest to the subjects, as well as the subjects themselves. History from the horse's mouth.

If the accounts of various interviewees involved with the oral history of San Francisco Opera differ in detail, they are nonetheless a colorful account of the Company as it grew and developed. For those who may see a paradox in this fact, a note: history as written by an orthodox historian is subject to the bias of one person, usually far removed from the history itself. History as told in the words of the subjects is beholden to the biases of many, but is essentially formed by first-

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hand impressions, and the reader has a wide margin for interpretation.

To date, the Bancroft Library's Oral History office has produced nearly 800 histories, including those of California governors Warren, Brown, and Reagan; of photographer Dorothea Lange and sculptor Ruth Asawa. The Adler/Opera history represents a rare foray into the world of music, but one which Willa Baum hopes will lead to new projects. "We're trying to outguess the future," says Baum. "We ask questions broadly; we want a great deal of material. If you're setting out to write a book, you have in mind certain aspects and want to interview your subject on certain themes. But we assume that there will be many books, many articles, so we try to get from each person we interview all the riches they have that may feed into projects as yet unimagined."

A portion of the history deals with Adler's childhood in Vienna:

I was born in Vienna, in 1905, on the second of April. I was a premature child—I think I was a seven-month baby—and I was born on a Sunday night at 11:30 p.m. There is a saying in Austria... that a child born on a Sunday would be a lucky person. So my mother absolutely wanted a Sunday child, and she made every effort that I would be born still on Sunday, the second, and not on Monday, the third. I was born at home. During those years it was customary in Europe that children were born in the home of parents who had an adequate apartment and not in hospitals. And so it was.

Vienna was then the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire under the next-to-last of the Hapsburgs. Music was king in the crown capital, and Ernst and Ida Adler were closely involved with both theater and music. They also had very strong ambitions for their son and only child. At home they spoke only French for several years when Adler was very young, and then English; later they supported his desire to study simultaneously at the prestigious Musikakademie, the Conservatory, and the University. (It was at the Musikakademie that he met Herbert von Karajan, who in the early 1960s was to invite him to be his administrator at Vienna Opera.) And so on, through the maestro's basic training, most important teachers and assorted experiences

between the two wars. The text is rich with stories of the famous musical and theatrical families in Vienna and of Adler's work with Reinhardt and Toscanini, and Adler tells them with a keen eye for detail and humor, just as he relates stories of his years in Chicago and in San Francisco.

Once on the subject of the San Francisco Opera, the other voices join his, and the story of the Company's development is expanded upon. There are views of the Bay Area community and its financial resources and great giving families; the "angels" who long supported opera in San Francisco, and the development of corpo-



Kurt Herbert Adler today.

rate giving is scrutinized. The repertoire of the growing company is considered in some depth: the world, American, and local premieres of works by Cherubini, Orff, Walton, Poulenc, Janáček, Britten, Massenet, and Strauss, among others; the starry list of artists who made American debuts in San Francisco over the years (Tebaldi, Borkh, Jurinac, Nilsson, Rysanek, Schwarzkopf, Simionato, Burrows, Christoff, Evans, Ponnelle, Wixell, just to skim off the top).

The stages that Adler built are also discussed: The Merola Opera Program, Western Opera Theater, and Spring Opera Theater, which must go into opera annals as being at the forefront of what was genuinely new in the lyric theater in the 1960s and 1970s. A number of young

singers who first tried their wings here and then soared (and some who didn't) will be interviewed, as well as the critics who were the closest observers of the Company through the years.

Artists, of whom several are yet to be interviewed on the East Coast and in Europe, are routinely asked what made San Francisco welcoming—why did they journey so far afield from the Covent Garden—La Scala—Munich—Vienna—Metropolitan Opera circuit to accept assignments in San Francisco; why did they agree to sing roles for the first time in San Francisco, what distinguished the Company administratively and artistically from other houses.

For the Adler/Opera project, as is the rule with major oral histories, an advisory committee made up of University personnel and music faculty, community leaders, and members from opera officialdom and the press has been chosen to help with shaping the project and funding it. Each oral history must raise its own funding; to date, a \$40,000 budget has been met more than halfway with a \$10,000 grant from the L.J. and Mary C. Skaggs Foundation, \$5,000 from the University Chancellor's Fund, and \$10,000 from individual sponsors. Otto Meyer, adviser, interviewee, and longtime friend of the Company, is Chairman of the fundraising efforts.

The Kurt Herbert Adler/San Francisco Opera oral history will deal with both positive and negative sides of the ledger, but it will be the more colorful for that. It will help lay out the accounting of opera production in the 20th century for scholars, researchers, and general readers, and it will explore the story of a remarkable man among remarkable men, and the company they built together.

If Kurt Herbert Adler appropriated the role of the last of the great nineteenth century impresarios to himself, he was very nearly typecast for the role. His thick Viennese accent, frowning mien and charm, the energy that exuded from his every gesture, the piercing eyes and wings of white hair presented the perfect picture of what he was: the absolute, all-seeing general director. And it is fair to say that of all the opera performances Adler supervised in his years at San Francisco Opera, his own performance as its artistic and administrative head was perhaps the best performance of all, because while he admittedly made mistakes, his standards and his concept of what lyric theater should be were unerring. ■

THE ADLER YEARS (1953-1981)

- World Premiere
- American Premiere
- American Stage Premiere

AUBER

Fra Diavolo: 1968

BEETHOVEN

Fidelio: 1954, 1961, 1964, 1969, 1978

- The Creatures of Prometheus (ballet): 1953

BELLINI

Norma: 1972, 1975, 1978

I Puritani: 1966, 1977

La Sonnambula: 1960, 1963

BERG

Lulu: 1965, 1971

Wozzeck: 1960, 1962, 1968, 1981

BERLIOZ

Les Troyens: 1966, 1968

BIZET

Carmen: 1953, 1955, 1959, 1960, 1962, 1964, 1966, 1970, 1981

BOITO

Mefistofele: 1953, 1963

BRITTEN

Billy Budd: 1978

- A Midsummer Night's Dream: 1961, 1971

Peter Grimes: 1973, 1976

CHARPENTIER

Louise: 1955, 1967

CHERUBINI

- Medea: 1958

- The Portuguese Inn: 1954

CILEA

Adriana Lecouvreur: 1977

DALLAPICCOLA

Il Prigioniero: 1979

DÉBUSSY

Pelléas et Mélisande: 1965, 1969, 1979

DELLO JOIO

- Blood Moon: 1961

DONIZETTI

The Daughter of the Regiment: 1962, 1974

Don Pasquale: 1980

L'Elisir d'Amore: 1956, 1967, 1969, 1975

La Favorita: 1973

Lucia di Lammermoor: 1954, 1957, 1961, 1968, 1972, 1981

- Maria Stuarda: 1971

VON EINEM

- The Visit of the Old Lady: 1972

GIORDANO

Andrea Chenier: 1955, 1959, 1965, 1975

GLAZOUNOV

Variations de Ballet (ballet): 1960

GLUCK

Orfeo: 1959

GOUNOD

Faust: 1955, 1962, 1967, 1970, 1977

HONEGGER

- Joan of Arc at the Stake: 1954

IMBRIE

- Angle of Repose: 1976

JANÁČEK

Jenůfa: 1969, 1980

Katya Kabanova: 1977

- The Makropulos Case: 1966, 1976

LEHÁR

The Merry Widow: 1981

LEONCAVALLO

I Pagliacci: 1955, 1959, 1962, 1964, 1976, 1980

MASCAGNI

Cavalleria Rusticana: 1962, 1976, 1980

MASSENET

Le Cid: 1981

Esclarmonde: 1974

Manon: 1954, 1958, 1971, 1981

Thaïs: 1976

Werther: 1953, 1975, 1978

THE ADLER YEARS (1953-1981)

MEYERBEER
L'Africaine: 1972

*** **MILHAUD**
Christopher Columbus: 1968

MONTEMEZZI
L'Amore dei Tre Re: 1959, 1966

MONTEVERDI
L'Incoronazione di Poppea:
1975, 1981

MOUSSORGSKY
Boris Godunov: 1953, 1956,
1961, 1966, 1973

MOZART
Così fan tutte: 1956, 1957, 1960,
1963, 1970, 1973, 1979
Don Giovanni: 1953, 1955, 1959,
1962, 1965, 1968, 1974, 1978,
1981
Idomeneo: 1977
The Magic Flute: 1967, 1969,
1975, 1980
Le Nozze di Figaro: 1954, 1958,
1961, 1964, 1966, 1972

ORFF
*** Carmina Burana: 1958, 1959,
1964, 1971
** The Wise Maiden: 1958

PONCHIELLI
La Gioconda: 1967, 1979

POULENC
** Dialogues of the Carmelites:
1957, 1963
La Voix Humaine: 1979

PUCCINI
La Bohème: 1953, 1954, 1956,
1958, 1959, 1960, 1962, 1965,
1967, 1969, 1973, 1978
La Fanciulla del West: 1960,
1965, 1979
Gianni Schicchi: 1958, 1960,
1964, 1975, 1979
Madama Butterfly: 1953, 1954,
1956, 1957, 1959, 1961, 1966,
1968, 1971, 1974, 1980
Manon Lescaut: 1956, 1967,
1974
Il Tabarro: 1954, 1971, 1975
Tosca: 1954, 1955, 1956, 1957,
1960, 1963, 1965, 1970, 1972,
1976, 1978
Turandot: 1953, 1954, 1957,
1961, 1964, 1968, 1977

REIMANN
** Lear: 1981

RIMSKY-KORSAKOV
Le Coq d'Or: 1955

ROSSINI
Il Barbiere di Siviglia: 1953,
1958, 1963, 1965, 1968, 1976
La Cenerentola: 1969, 1974
Semiramide: 1981
Tancredi: 1979
Con Amore (ballet): 1960

SAINT-SAËNS
Samson et Dalila: 1963, 1980

SCHÖNBERG
Erwartung: 1968

SCHULLER
** The Visitation: 1967

SHOSTAKOVICH
** Katerina Ismailova: 1964
Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk: 1981

SMETANA
The Bartered Bride: 1958, 1964

STRAUSS, JOHANN
Die Fledermaus: 1965, 1973

STRAUSS, RICHARD
Arabella: 1980
Ariadne auf Naxos: 1957, 1959,
1965, 1969, 1977
Capriccio: 1963
Elektra: 1953, 1958, 1966, 1973,
1979
** Die Frau ohne Schatten: 1959,
1960, 1964, 1976, 1980
Der Rosenkavalier: 1955, 1957,
1960, 1962, 1964, 1967, 1971,
1978
Salome: 1954, 1968, 1970, 1974

STRAVINSKY
The Rake's Progress: 1962, 1970
Dances Concertantes (ballet):
1959

TCHAIKOVSKY
Eugene Onegin: 1971
The Queen of Spades: 1963,
1975

VERDI
Aida: 1955, 1956, 1957, 1959,
1960, 1963, 1969, 1972, 1977,
1981

THE ADLER YEARS (1953-1981)

Un Ballo in Maschera: 1953,
1957, 1961, 1965, 1967, 1971,
1977

Don Carlo: 1958, 1962, 1966,
1973, 1979

Ernani: 1968

Falstaff: 1956, 1962, 1963, 1966,
1970

La Forza del Destino: 1954,
1958, 1963, 1965, 1969, 1976,
1979

Luisa Miller: 1974

Macbeth: 1955, 1957, 1967

Nabucco: 1961, 1964, 1970

Otello: 1959, 1962, 1964, 1970,
1974, 1978

Rigoletto: 1954, 1958, 1961,
1966, 1973, 1981

Simon Boccanegra: 1956, 1960,
1975, 1980

La Traviata: 1953, 1957, 1960,
1963, 1964, 1969, 1973, 1980

Il Trovatore: 1956, 1958, 1962,
1964, 1968, 1971, 1981

WAGNER

Der Fliegende Holländer: 1954,
1956, 1975, 1979

Götterdämmerung: 1969, 1972

Lohengrin: 1955, 1960, 1965,
1978

Die Meistersinger von
Nürnberg: 1959, 1961, 1965,
1971, 1981

Parsifal: 1964, 1974

Das Rheingold: 1967, 1972,
1977

Siegfried: 1970, 1972

Tannhäuser: 1958, 1966, 1973

Tristan und Isolde: 1953, 1967,
1970, 1974, 1980

Die Walküre: 1953, 1956, 1963,
1968, 1972, 1976, 1981

WALTON

- Troilus and Cressida: 1955

WEILL

- Royal Palace (ballet): 1968

ZANDONAI

Francesca da Rimini: 1956

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